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THE
BROAD RIVER
REVIEW

Volume 50
2018

The Literary Review of Gardner-Webb University
Boiling Springs, North Carolina

THE BROAD RIVER REVIEW

ASSOCIATE EDITORS

Summer Byers
Emily Eidson
Anna Francis
Aaron Hilton
Hannah Roberts
Christian Vaughan
Kate Vriesema

The *Broad River Review* is published annually by the Department of English Language and Literature at Gardner-Webb University in Boiling Springs, North Carolina. Upon request, this publication can be provided in an alternate format by calling (704) 406-4414.

Acknowledgements

Cover Photo: “Blue Door” by Rollin Jewett, 2018
Ron Rash, “Watauga County: 1962” in *Waking*
Ron Rash, “At Reid Hartley’s Junkyard” in *Raising the Dead*
Estefania Acquaviva, “Calle La Rueda” in *Typishly*
Olaf Kroneman, “Fighting to Heal” in *The Intima*
Gary Beck, “Purchase Power II” in *The Magnolia Review*

Broad River Review, v. 50, 2018
broadriverreview@gardner-webb.edu
www.broadriverreview.org

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ARTWORK

Rollin Jewett, <i>Blue Door</i>	cover
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CONTRIBUTORS

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EDITORS' NOTE

Gardner-Webb University has published a literary magazine continuously since 1968. Early issues appeared under the names titles *The Green Scribe* and *One Little Candle*, then a long run as *Reflections*, beginning in 1973. Finally, in 2002, we became the *Broad River Review*, when the magazine was also upgraded from side-staple to a perfect bound publication and increased its scope from local to regional/national. This year, the *Broad River Review* publishes its 50th Anniversary Issue.

Each year, the *Broad River Review* publishes a number of contest winners and select finalists. The Rash Awards in Poetry and Fiction are named in honor of Ron Rash, a 1976 graduate of Gardner-Webb University. Rash's first published poem, "Last Night Ride," appeared in the pages of this literary review the year of his graduation. Since then, Rash has worked prodigiously to become a prize-winning writer and *New York Times* bestseller. We honor's Rash's work in this issue by reprinting two of our favorite Rash poems.

The editors would like to thank Taylor Brown and Bill Brown, who served as judges for the Rash Awards in Fiction and Poetry, respectively. Taylor Brown selected "Such Friends" by Leslee Becker, of Fort Collins, Colorado, for the fiction award, while Bill Brown chose "Puzzle" by Patricia Hamilton, of Jackson, Tennessee, as winner of the poetry award. Congratulations to both winners, who received \$500 each and publication in the 2018 issue.

Taylor Brown said of Becker's story: "'Such Friends' is a story of exceptional depth and guts, with a clear emotional center and characters who are eccentric, endearing, flawed, and most of all, alive. Like the best stories, I did not want this one to end." Bill Brown commented on Hamilton's poem: "'Puzzle' is an artistic, poetic sustained metaphor with a rich personal voice and detailed choices. A puzzle-working family has a quiet, introverted father suffering from deep post-war experiences. The poem ends with an emotioal outburst of the father's grief that is the finishing piece of the family puzzle. This poem is a powerful reading experience."

Additionally, the J. Calvin Koonts Poetry Award is awarded to a senior English major or minor at Gardner-Webb University whose poetry is judged most outstanding by a committee of department members. Congratulations to seniors Mallory Moore and Hannah Ray for reciving this recognition. Gardner-Webb University students Summer Byers and Aaron Hilton also received our Editors' Prize in Poetry for "In the Name of Victory" and "System Failure," respectively.

The *Broad River Review* would also like to thank every writer who submitted to us or entered our contests. A full list of honorable mentions and finalists can be found on our website, www.broadriverreview.org. Our next contest submission period will coincide with our regular submission period, which will be September 1–November 15, 2018. Full submission information and guidelines, including profiles of the judges, will appear on our web site in August. We also appreciate our subscribers and those who have donated to us.

Finally, the editors offer sincere appreciation to the Department of English Language and Literature at Gardner-Webb University for its continued support. In addition, the editors would like to thank university administration for its sustained financial backing of a literary review.

RON RASH

Watauga County: 1962

Smell of honeysuckle bright
as dew beads stringing lines on
the writing spider's silk page,
night's cool lingering, the sun
awake but still lying down,
its slant-light seeping through gaps
of oak branches as the first
blackberry pings the milk pail's
emptiness, begins the slow
filling up, the plush feel of
berry only yesterday
a red-green knot before steeped
in dark to deepest purple,
and as dawn passes, the pail
grows heavy, wearies my arm
until I sit down inside
that maze of briar I make
my kingdom, lift to my mouth
the sweet wine of blackberry
my hands stained like royalty.

RON RASH

At Reid Hartley's Junkyard

To enter we find the gap
between barbed wire and briars,
pass the German Shepherd chained
to an axle, cross the ditch
of oil black as a tar pit,
my aunt compelled to come here
on a Sunday after church,
asking me when her husband
refused to search this island
reefed with past catastrophes.
We make our way to the heart
of the junkyard, cling of rust
and beggarlice on our clothes,
bumpers hot as a skillet
as we squeeze between car husks
to find in this forever
stilled traffic one Ford pickup,
tires stripped, radio yanked out,
driver's door open. My aunt
gets in, stares through glass her son
looked through the last time he knew
the world, as though believing
like others who come here she
might see something to carry
from this wreckage, as I will
when I look past my aunt's ruined
Sunday dress, torn stockings, find
her right foot pressed to the brake.

LESLEE BECKER

Such Friends

Although Paula had warned Lee about inviting strangers in their house, Lee tutored students at home, and now, on Monday morning, Lee was waiting for her new client, Gary Pritchard. “A definite oddball,” Paula would say of him. “The oddball,” was a no-show, Lee was glad to discover. The weather cooperated with her desire to have the day to herself. Not even nine yet, but the trees drooped in the July heat.

“Karma,” was the first thing Gary Pritchard had said on the phone early yesterday morning. He explained that he was considering making a dramatic change in his life, and happened on Lee’s newspaper ad. He had dyslexia. “A trial for me in school and in everyday life, so I am not a stranger to adversity, Mrs. Stein, but I’m in the driver’s seat now. I’m thirty-two. In my prime. I know what I want.”

He was free every day of the week, but preferred early mornings. He might’ve been applying for a job, she thought, as he summed up his history, speaking in a decorated, formal way.

At the end of the call, she’d retrieved the newspaper, stunned to see a notice about the death of a former client, a seventeen-year-old girl. Tiffany Wilson had fallen from the bridge at the reservoir, according to the police. The newspaper article concluded with the curious comment that “Ms. Wilson had attended local schools, but was being home-schooled at the time of her demise.”

It had been a year since Lee worked with her, and couldn’t recall anything significant about her, other than her plain, old-fashioned look, and that when Lee asked her what she wanted to master, Tiffany had said, “High school.”

She was heading to the study to look at Tiffany Wilson’s tutoring file when she saw a fat man in white coveralls striding down the street, a little dog parading behind. Moments later, the doorbell rang, the fat man, a house painter, she assumed, probably confusing her place with someone else’s.

“Mrs. Stein. Gary Pritchard here for our assignation,” he said.

“Oh,” she said, startled and embarrassed, so she looked past him at the little dog resting in the shade of juniper bushes. “Our appointment was at eight.”

He glanced at his watch. “Mrs. Stein, we established nine o’clock for our appointment. I value punctuality.”

“As do I, but my last appointment ran overtime,” she lied.

Heat wafted in with him, along with the smell of talcum powder. She offered him a glass of water and a chair at the kitchen table. “I usually tutor in the study, but it’s too hot today. My partner and I never got around to putting in an air conditioner.”

“I’m used to heat,” he said, looking around the room. He was sweating, and when Lee sat across from him, she could hear his labored breathing. She glanced down, noticing how small his feet looked, compared with the rest of him, those small feet stuffed in dutiful-looking white shoes. Such a stupid and shameful thought, but she’d hate to be in his shoes.

She told him that she was familiar with dyslexia, but he’d have to be honest with her about his particular struggles.

“To be honest, I struggle with comprehension and usage. Words get twisted, and I often find meanings not intended by the author, but I’m a wizard in math. I can add whole columns of numbers in my head. Go ahead, try me, but you might want to get a calculator.”

“That won’t be necessary. Okay, 32, plus 49, plus 99,” she said, using his age, hers, and the day’s predicted high temperature.

“Easy,” he said, and announced the sum. “Shall we start then? Shall I tell you my goals?”

“I always begin by learning about my clients’ goals. I find that some are unrealistic.”

“Self-satisfaction and personal advancement. I want to learn to express myself better. To master effective communication.”

“Good for you,” she said, “but I need more details about your history of misinterpreting words.”

“Okay, I’ll give you an e.g. I listen to songs like everybody else, but I hear different lyrics. ‘It’s puppy love,’ I thought the Beatles were saying, and even when I see ‘Can’t buy me love’ in print, I still read it as puppy love.”

“Interesting, but not uncommon.” She handed him English on the Job, told him to read the opening chapter for homework, and write an essay about what mattered most to him.

“That’s it for today?”

“I’m afraid so. I have other commitments. This was our get-acquainted session. People often decide that what I offer isn’t what they had in mind.”

“I’ll deliver the goods at nine tomorrow, Mrs. Stein,” he said, and stepped outside.

The sun had moved a notch higher, casting plates of light over houses and cars. The little dog got up and followed Gary down the street.

He was a hard case, but she was used to working with difficult students. She'd taught History to middle-school students back in Ohio, and when she began tutoring in Colorado two years ago, she worked with clients who had Attention Deficit Disorder, dyslexia, and other problems, and with adults who wanted to master English, or prepare for licensure exams. She knew she was taking a risk, tutoring in her home, so she let clients think she had a husband. She'd lived with Paula Merkel for four years in Marietta, teaching, and taking graduate courses in History. When Paula landed a job in Colorado as Director of Special Collections for the town library, Lee resisted the move. She told Paula what she'd be sacrificing, hearing herself describing her passion for teaching, and making it sound like a once-in-a-lifetime love affair. She'd expected Paula to say: "Yes, you get attached to students, and then they move on. A perfect love affair."

"I know what you'd be giving up," Paula had said. "You don't have to do it. It's not a test."

Three weeks after they moved to Colorado, Paula died of an aneurysm. She'd gone out to the Eastern Plains that day to appraise a family's estate, and Lee had taken a long drive, and then bought drapes. A ladder was propped against the side of the house, when she returned home, and a police car was in the driveway. She assumed that one of the roofers had fallen, and then the policeman delivered the news.

The roofers offered heartfelt condolences, as if they'd had a long history with her and Paula. She'd felt a baffling isolation when they left. She notified Paula's relatives, then researched aneurysms, as if she'd be called on to supply a definition: "A calamitous event. A sudden attack which arrests the powers of sense and motion."

A week later, she went to the Eastern Plains to meet the family who sold their book collection to Paula.

"She seemed fine," the woman had said. "She bought all our books, then left. My husband found her in the car, just down the road, at the end of our fence line."

Lee looked at the site, and imagined Paula, staring at the wind-heeled grass, feeling utterly confused about how she ended up alone in an unfamiliar place.

"I was coming home. I bought drapes. I wanted to surprise Paula, and then I saw the police car in the driveway," she'd told herself, trying to understand her actions. She didn't return to Ohio, and assumed neighbors must've talked about her. "The peculiar woman who lives in the beige house with the new roof. A jilted soul, most likely."

She looked at Tiffany Wilson's tutoring file, finding mediocre assignments, but recalled that Tiffany did have a flair for doing impersonations.

Lee had asked her about school, and Tiffany imitated a teacher. She sat at Lee's desk in the study, holding a pen and a school assignment.

"This is what she does," Tiffany had said, grinning. "See, she's thrilled to pieces when she reads bad homework, but it's a different story when a student does a good job. She frowns, and looks real bored. I love spying on her."

Gary Pritchard arrived at 9:00 the next morning, wearing the same white outfit, and carrying a briefcase. He handed the essay to her. "Go at it. I can take it."

"I'd like to know more about your interests and specific plans. Some of my clients want to brush up on certain subjects for college entrance exams."

"That's not in the cards for me. College. Maybe down the road. I like what I'm doing now."

"And what's that?"

"Culinary scientist. I work in the evenings at Old Town Bakery."

"I know the place. I love their pies."

"That book you gave me. Could I ask what level?"

"College level," she lied. "Why?"

"Well, it seemed dated and simplistic. I wasn't exactly enthused with the anachronistic material about Eskimos and whale blubber, but I enjoyed doing the essay."

He'd titled it "Miss Daisy."

She came into my life unexpectedly. I was returning home from work on a splendid fall evening. The air was crisp, the leaves were colorful, and she was waiting for me at my door.

The essay went on about Miss Daisy's beauty. She was blonde and "curvaceous." Lee expected an account of lovemaking, and there it was—a description of the first time Gary and Miss Daisy slipped under the covers.

Bliss. That's what I felt when this heaven-sent creature spooned against me.

She glanced up. Gary was staring at her. She returned to the essay.

I hope that I have not missiled you. Miss Daisy is really a dog. A genuine bowser.

"I like how you romanticized Daisy, then became frank, but does it have to be so extreme? Going from a vision of beauty to utter homeliness, by saying that she's a dog."

"Miss Daisy is an actual dog. Look outside for confirmation of this fact."

Lee did not look outside. She circled "missiled" on Gary's essay.

"I wasn't trying to be coy or suggestive. Do you see a pattern in my mistakes?"

"Commonly confused words," she said, pointing to other errors.

"I guess I'm not alone then."

She paused, wondering if what she felt—ordinary humility, and the odd sensation of appropriating Gary's private history—showed. "How long have you had Daisy?" she asked.

"Five years. She was completely unexpected. That's what I wanted to convey. I tried to show the inside parts. Want me to rewrite it?"

"It's fine. Mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"I've been husky all my life."

"No, I wondered if you stayed up all night. Your schedule at the bakery. You stayed up all night to do your assignments?"

"Yes. I generally go straight home to bed, after work, but I was too stimulated last night, doing my essay, but the reading homework had the opposite effect. What's the word? The opposite of stimulation? It starts with an S."

Seduction, she thought, because what came to her was an image of Paula, dusted with flour, the first night Lee had gone to Paula's for dinner. She'd wanted to touch and taste the smudge on Paula's forehead when Paula met her at the door, apologizing for running behind.

"I got carried away," she'd said, inviting Lee into a house filled with nurturing scents—bread, soup, roast lamb, and apple pie. "I don't know what I was trying to prove. I'm really not much of a cook, and I didn't know what you like."

You, you, Lee had thought, but said, "You went all out."

The pie had baked too long, and as Lee watched Paula trying to salvage it, tears had come inexplicably to her eyes. She'd glanced away, and saw a hem of crimson clouds, seemingly stalled, as if they didn't care if they got anywhere, and then the clouds moved.

"Soporific?" Gary asked. "Is that the word?"

"Right," she said, "but we all read what we want into certain things. We can't help it. It happens to me all the time."

"I could listen to you all day, but time is short."

Passive-aggressive, she thought. "Yes, we don't have much time to work on mastering effective communication."

She quickly gave him an assignment that required him to write a brief summary of a newspaper article and an essay about what he'd take if he were exiled to a distant place.

"I also want you to consider a recipe for personal success, and the ingredients necessary to achieve it," she said.

“Easy. First—”

“Not now. Isn’t it something you want to think about carefully?”

“I like to be spontaneous.”

Overrated, she thought, but gave him today’s newspaper, telling him to pick an article, and make notes for his summary. Then she went into the study to calm down, but the sight of the desk and bookstand seemed ghostly. She imagined Tiffany Wilson spying on her, seeing her embarrassment about her misinterpretation of Gary’s essay, and today’s submersion in memories of Paula made her feel she was underwater, eager to reach the surface.

She parted the window blinds, glanced outside, and there was Daisy, in the shade, her blonde coat tinsel with juniper needles.

Gary had fallen asleep at the kitchen table. She tapped his shoulder, startling him. “Sorry, Mrs. Stein. Mea culpa. It won’t happen again. I’ll be on top of things tomorrow.”

She watched him leave, and then saw him muttering to Miss Daisy outside, the two of them strolling away, the dog peeing on the neighbors’ lawn. Lee saw her neighbors shaking their white heads, and muttering. When they stuck a flag out, she realized that tomorrow was the Fourth of July.

She was surprised to hear a young woman confirming that this was Gary Pritchard’s home number, but he was indisposed. “Whom shall I say is calling?”

“Wrong number.”

She was about to call Old Town Bakery when her phone rang. Call tracing, she assumed, prepared to lie about why she hung up earlier, but it was Tiffany Wilson’s mother. “Who?” Lee asked, stunned.

“Tiffany’s mother,” the woman repeated, sounding calm, and saying that she found items in Tiffany’s room that belonged to Paula.

“Oh?” Lee felt her heart grab, and tried to express her condolences. “Tiffany was one of my favorite students. I’m sorry about--”

Mrs. Wilson supplied her address, and said she’d appreciate it if Lee could pick up the things today. “We’re going to Grand Lake, we always do this time of year. Our son needs stability. Strangers have been coming by. We just want to finish up business here first.”

Lee felt odd, searching her closet for a suitable outfit, as if this decision mattered more than the shocking fact that Tiffany Wilson had somehow ended up with Paula’s effects. She tried on a black dress, then an orchid one, feeling as if someone were watching and judging her.

The Wilsons lived in a subdivision called The Buttes, massive houses built into a pocket of land near the foothills. A silver RV was in

the driveway, a little boy in the passenger seat. “Are you the teacher?” he shouted down at her. “You’re late.”

Mrs. Wilson was pretty, and younger than Lee expected, her red hair pulled back into a ponytail. Her husband was slight and wore glasses.

“We’d invite you inside, but the house is a mess,” said Mrs. Wilson. “Tiffany used to talk about you a lot.”

“I enjoyed my sessions with her,” Lee said quickly.

“She had potential, didn’t she?” Mr. Wilson asked.

“Oh, yes, definitely. Original and creative.”

“We’re leaving town later on,” he said. “It’ll be good to get away. This is the deepest trough we’ve ever been in.”

“We’re working on closure,” his wife reminded him.

He handed Lee a shopping bag. “Figured your friend must want her stuff back.” He glanced at his wife. “She went through Tiffany’s room.”

At another house, a man got on a riding mower, and the Wilsons watched him, as if witnessing a remarkable event, and then retreated into the house.

She kept driving in circles, trying to find the road out of the subdivision. Then she pictured Paula reminding her about navigation. She’d told Paula she was afraid of getting lost, and Paula pointed to the mountains, telling Lee she could always use them to find her way home. She felt low for Paula’s assumption that she was referring to their house. She should’ve told her she was talking about herself, her fear of being erased. That was the feeling each day after Paula went to work. How pathetic she must’ve looked to the elderly couple next door the day she’d introduced herself, and stood at their door with peach cobbler, hoping they’d invite her into the cool socket of their house. “Now’s not a good time for us,” the woman had told her.

She drove to the foothills and parked at a rest area. No one was in sight, but she felt furtive as she rummaged through the shopping bag. Her favorite fountain pen. She thought she’d misplaced it. Why would Tiffany take the pen? The pilfering would rattle anyone, but she was more afraid of what she’d find that belonged to Paula. Books, she discovered, with Paula’s name stamped inside. A musty-smelling one on birds of the Southwest, and a thick book with gilded pages—a sentimental 19th-century novel by an obscure author. She shook the pages of the books, but nothing fell out, and then she pictured Mrs. Wilson going through Tiffany’s room, searching for something revealing to explain her daughter’s actions. And now, the Wilsons were traveling to an impossible destination, as if grief were a homely thing that could be locked in a trunk, and left behind.

"I've got a surprise for you. Close your eyes," Paula had said when they arrived in town on a searing June day, in the same car she was in now, and that Paula was in the day she died. "Open your eyes. Look."

A plain beige ranch house, low and squat, and so aware of its own drabness, it tried to conceal part of itself behind juniper bushes and a Russian olive tree. This is what Paula had picked when she flew out a week earlier. Paula had ushered her inside, and yanked back the awful orange curtains, the nightmare complete when moths battled against her.

"Miller moths, Lee. They come this time of year. They're trying to get to the moon, but get sidetracked by all the lights."

"And they stupidly picked this dark house."

Paula said nothing. She returned to the car and began unloading their things.

"How did it happen?" Lee had asked herself, a question she often posed in history lessons in Ohio about wars and upheavals, urging students to dig deeper to discover that the real story lay behind the scenes, in the complicated motives and actions of people who had much to gain and lose.

Lying in bed with Paula at night, hearing her praise colleagues and pretty drives she'd discovered, Lee felt absurdly jealous of how easily Paula had adapted to the place, and then the day Paula asked her to go with her to the Eastern Plains, Lee claimed she needed to "tame the house," reminding Paula of work that had to be done. She drove out of town, and felt like a teenager by seeing how far she could go, and ended up on a busy highway south of town, plastered with chain restaurants and strip malls. She'd wanted it to fail. That much was clear to her, and likely obvious to Paula. What pleasure could anyone take in seeing nothing but faults in a town?

She turned back, and bought new drapes. Such a small thing, yet she couldn't wait to rush home to tell Paula what happened. "I planned to leave, but I ended up buying drapes." She wanted to say that she understood why she tried to rile her and provoke arguments. "It's childish, testing you, but I think I do it to force something in myself and in you."

"This?" she hoped Paula would say, showing what she meant by holding her and making love to her. "This?"

A young woman with multicolored hair was behind the counter at Old Town Bakery, sprinkling powdered sugar on doughnuts.

"I love how it smells in here," Lee said.

"It's me. The scent's all mine. I made it up, using various oils and tinctures. I call it Hazel, after my cat."

She waved her wrist under Lee's nose. It smelled medicinal.

“It’s original,” Lee said, and realized that this was the person who’d answered the phone at Gary Pritchard’s. She scanned the display case. “No pies today?”

The young woman frowned extravagantly, like a mime demonstrating sorrow. “No, we’re out of pies, I’m sorry to say, but our man will be back on board this evening.”

“Good. I assumed you’d close early, for the holiday.”

“Not us. I myself loathe Independence Day. The fireworks scare Hazel.”

She ate two doughnuts in the car, her hands coated in powdered sugar, a record of it on the steering wheel, and on her lips, she noticed, when she glanced at the mirror at home, seeing herself in an orchid dress, clutching a shopping bag, and looking matronly. She removed the dress, and felt profoundly sad, the grief stealing up on her, like an impatient companion.

She lay down, and began reading the old novel, a bit too rich and florid for her taste, the lush descriptions of quaint village life, the pretty young heroine trying to choose between suitors, a familiar scenario, but she continued reading.

Then she remembered a session with Tiffany, and wondered how she could’ve forgotten such an eccentric thing. Tiffany had loved novels, and confessed that she always stopped reading right before the end.

“My God. Why would you do such a thing?”

“So I don’t have to say good-bye to friends, Mrs. Stein. I can keep them with me, make up my own scenes, and put myself in with the people, and it never has to end.”

Gary did not arrive at 9:00. The day was unusually hushed, and the sky looked bleached. A girl on a lavishly decorated tricycle passed. Lee stayed in the kitchen, rehearsing what she’d say to Gary. “You’re late. You better have a good excuse.”

Why was she casting herself as the scolding parent, nagging wife, and spinster school teacher, even coming up with absurd images of Gary and the bakery girl spooned together in the back room of the shop?

The more plausible scenario—Gary calling it quits—shocked her, as if she were subjecting herself to a familiar pattern of loss. She sat down at the kitchen table, glanced at the chair across from her, and flinched at the thought of Gary knowing she didn’t have a husband. He likely saw her as a lonely, sealed-off soul, always asking clients about their personal lives, trying to live vicariously.

And then she pictured Tiffany Wilson watching her habits, and imitating her later, using the stolen pen as a prop, and making fun of her for her little brother, but maybe Tiffany wanted to feel a connection with people,

and had taken objects as keepsakes. She'd seen Paula's photograph in the study, and Lee had told her about Paula's job at the library. Had Tiffany tried to fashion a story about Paula and her love of books, a trait they had in common?

The doorbell rang, and a dog yelped, startling her.

"I apologize for my tardiness, but personal circumstances interfered," Gary said, holding a trembling Miss Daisy.

Firecrackers went off, Miss Daisy leapt from his arms, and raced to the bedroom.

A teacup and books were on the nightstand, and a slip hung haphazardly from a door hook. She felt her face flush, when Gary got on his hands and knees, peered under the bed, and pulled Miss Daisy out, her pelt coated with dust.

"I'll bet in all your years of tutoring you've never seen anything like this, Mrs. Stein."

She looked like a specimen to him, and she wanted to tell him she'd only tutored for two years, but he shook his head.

"I've got a confession to make," he said.

She sat on the edge of the bed, expecting him to say he no longer needed her.

"I'm afraid that my homework is disappointing."

She sighed. "Oh, is that all?"

"Well, it's a big deal to me. I couldn't find Miss Daisy. I looked everywhere, but I had to go to work. I came home with a heavy heart, but just when I thought the worst had happened, I found her. In the cellar. Bottom line. I didn't complete my assignments. Hopefully, you'll forgive me."

She was touched, hearing him say, "Hopefully," a word that used to irritate her. He handed her a sheet of paper. His newspaper summary, one sentence: "If left alone, chickens can live up to thirty years."

"That's amazing," she said.

"Yes, I thought so. That was the gist of the newspaper article."

"You don't have to do the other assignments. You must be exhausted."

He looked crestfallen. "Don't you want to know what I'd take to a distant place? You weren't specific about the nature of the place, if it was terrible or pleasant."

"Doesn't have to be one or the other. I didn't have a specific place in mind. It's more revealing to see what people come up with."

"I agree, but I wouldn't take English on the Job to anyplace, real or made up. I'll bet you're positive that you know my answer."

“Miss Daisy?” she said, and saw the dog’s ears twitch.

“I knew you’d say that, so I decided on my journal. I could look back on everything that happened to me, the things that seemed like a big deal at the time. Lucky for me that your assignments coincide with my current desire to write a cookbook of recipes I’ve been collecting over the years.”

“Karma?” she asked.

“Possibly,” he said, and as he continued to describe his ideas, she tried to recall details of the morning Paula had left to meet the family on the Eastern Plains. She’d worn a sober gray pants suit that was now tight on her, but wasn’t there something girlish and tentative when Paula asked her if she’d change her mind and come with her? “It could be fun,” Paula had said.

“I plan to incorporate stories about the recipes and the people behind them. Sort of like a memoir, with positive accounts about people overcoming obstacles. A how-to book with a twist. I’m doing it with the assistance of a co-worker. Hardly spellbinding, you might say, but that’s my story.” Gary stared at her, waiting for her reaction, and then added: “I’ve found in my line of work that people are glad to be asked their opinions, but you have judgment, of course.”

She was rattled for a moment, as if he’d said something intimate and revealing. “Yes, I understand now what you’re trying to do with the book. I like it. It shows spunk and imagination. It’s very good, Gary.”

He blushed at the praise, and she wondered if she’d ever commended Tiffany Wilson, and why she’d been so withholding to Paula. She couldn’t arrive at an answer, just that she’d felt superfluous in the company of such steadfast people.

“So, what would you take, Mrs. Stein, if you were stranded in a distant place?”

“Me? It already happened to me,” she said, surprising herself. “I went to a real place, just an ordinary house, but it felt awfully distant to me.”

“I think I know what you mean. I can relate to that.”

“To be honest, it’s often hard for me to know what’s real and what’s made up.”

He recoiled, as if facing a schizophrenic, so she tried to explain. “I’ve been trying to figure out some things about one of my clients, but I’ll never know for sure. What’s real, I mean, and what I want to be true.”

“Did I mislead you again? I didn’t mean to.” He began to back out of the room.

“No, wait, please,” she said, and glanced at Miss Daisy. “It’s like reading a book, and getting so close to the people, you don’t want it to end,

and then the person you love dies suddenly, robbing you of the chance to see how things will turn out. Does that make sense?"

He shrugged. "You're way above me. I just wanted to know what you'd take for your exile. That's all."

She leaned across the bed and picked up the novel Paula kept for some reason, and that Tiffany Wilson might've cherished in her solitary way. "This," she said. "This."

He had trouble taking it from her, and trying to hold Miss Daisy. Unreasonable, she thought, of her own expectations, as if everything depended on this moment—Gary Pritchard examining a personal effect—a sentimental old book. He began reading the opening page, and she couldn't tell if he found it satisfactory, but he looked at her and back at the novel in a respectful way that suggested he understood it was fragile, sweet. Impossible to put down.

PATRICIA L. HAMILTON

Puzzle

We were a puzzling family.
I learned early to look for the straight edges first,
to form the frame, then fill in the picture.

My father seldom spoke, never of the war
unless pressed, then only tales tourists tell—
seeing Parliament, hearing Big Ben chime.

It took patience to search for the missing bits
of blue sky or red barn, shapes emerging slowly
from the hundreds of jumbled fragments.

We coaxed one story from him: a concert
in Rheims, the bemused conductor reprising the encore—
the William Tell Overture—to cheering American troops.

After supper, radio tuned to the Dodgers game,
we would work companionably, consulting the box lid
for guidance, fixing its photograph in our minds.

With only a rudimentary knowledge of history,
of school textbooks' sanitized versions of war,
I didn't know the right questions to ask.

Sometimes my mother might hover a few minutes
and pop a piece in before returning to her chores,
leaving us to the luxury of our slow, methodical work.

Over the years we progressed from orderly scenes
of rural contentment to chaotic masses of autumn foliage
and blinding white snowscapes, their shadows blue-gray,

my father living more and more in memory,
the record-player-needle of his mind skipping
and landing in unheard grooves from the past.

One day a picture of the barren French countryside
coalesced, a wintry tableau
of townspeople gathered in the square,

men shouting curses, spitting on a woman
with the shaved head of a collaborator,
the mob dragging her from the back of an army truck.

As my father talked, he began to cry,
something I'd never seen before,
and at last, all the pieces snapped into place.

MALLORY MOORE

Lessons

Let's pull a moonrise kingdom:
I'll bring the cat, the mouse,
the swishing-swing,
if you teach me to toss twigs
in the air
to see where the wind is blowing.

Teach me to keep you
when I've decided to leave.

Teach me to write poetry without rhyme,
to puncture the lines like piercing ears,
to lick out mazes in the triple-scoop-swirl
before it melts.

If you catch me a local witch
with your boy-scout bear trap,
catch her alive, kicking and howling,
chomp her boily green leg
with those saw-shed teeth,
I'll salt your boardwalk fries
with my crocodile tears.

Build me a kingdom with
sandlot mischief and junkyard metal,
make me your girl with a Cracker Jack ring.

Swear to me, with a pocket-knife blood-bond,
(or paper-cut blood-blond,
if you're scared)
that you won't tell the reverend
I let you touch my chest.

Teach me to keep you
in a locket, clasped

in a letter box,
in a mason jar with holes,
in the pocket of my overalls.
Teach me to keep you
as I look over my shoulder,
when I've set sail,

when I've decided to leave.

MALLORY MOORE

Old Friend Comes to Visit

At night, boards my safe-harbored bed,
now a vessel in tumult. The
sailors in their shabby cabins,

who sleep under mildew, shiver
in rhythm with half-dreamed drinking
songs, have voted to throw Old Friend

overboard, like Jonah. In the
biting wind, I'm slipping on the
snail-slide deck. I cannot reach him.

Wake up. Watchful night. Up again
for water. I lay back down on
the damp, fallen sails, rocking in

the great, uncharted center of
the wide, wide world. Old Friend keeps an
iron grip on the mast. To you,

Old Friend, there's nothing sacred. Thief
of peace, puke-green, mucus monster,
lip-stuck suctioned to my ship. To

you, there's nothing. Not the salt-stored
meats for the seasick sailors, not
the prize vessel, not the fine line

of the sandy-grain horizon,
the meeting place of earth and sky
where I squint to see the morning.

HANNAH RAY

Sea Glass

If I could,
I would wrap your sunburned soul
in that blue-striped beach towel,
covered in sand
and promises kept.
I would press you to my chest, like your father did
when your seashell-sliced knees
used to burn with the sun and salt.

And if I could hold you in my hands,
Like those sea glass shards –
fractured
and
broken
but altogether beautiful —
a souvenir composed with care,
I would.

I would hold your face
like that stained glass window my grandfather salvaged
in the First Presbyterian Church by the shore,
after he watched the Hurricane
shatter the insides of the Sanctuary
constructed for sanctuary
worship of the One who instructs the hurricanes.

I would hold you like the Creator holds the winds
from the eye of the storm.
I'd let your waves froth and foam
whirl and smash and crash and break around me.

I'd be safe

inside the calm of being the one who could see
beauty is often a byproduct of destruction.

HANNAH RAY

Unrhymable Fruit

The day you told me you loved another girl,
you brought me compensatory, unrhymable fruit.
I stripped its ripe flesh like loosening pearls
from an oyster. Breaking heart, cracking tooth.
Like tadpoles swimming around my teeth,
the pith and the pulp give way to regret.
Malnourished by your promises of Vitamin C,
teary, bleary eyes sting with zest.
Juice finds cuts I thought I misplaced
on my hand that you now so formally shake—
a gesture to ensure our past is erased.
A beautiful betrayal to give a gift that takes
sweetness and turns it to sour. Like Locke,
your absolutes become relative like a clockwork
orange.

SUMMER BYERS

In the Name of Victory

Based on the iconic WWII photo of a sailor kissing a nurse, captured by Alfred Eisentaedt

We all heard the news—
the War was over.
Everyone was rushing about—
cheering, hugging, and kissing.

I did not know him,
but he certainly knew true patriotism.
Joy and excitement overwhelmed us,
all in the name of victory.

The happiness was contagious,
spreading from person to person.
And he merely had the fever.
He approached me.

Like America himself, holding me tightly—
thanking me for my dedication,
with a passionate kiss,
tasting of freedom and liberty.

AARON HILTON

System Failure

The machine hums along with life.
Myelin sheath circuits sling informational sparks
along twisting and turning routes.
With cerebral power, it hums into years of operation.

Then Error. Another recall failure.
There are critters in the machine,
creeping and crawling through the works.
You must clear the cobwebs more and more.

Things are slow when called back up.
The File is corrupted.
A virus runs rampant through the system—
blinking strobes of warning flare behind lenses.

Then they are gone,
deleted by a self-destructive, deteriorative program—
killing things loved, memory rendered inconsistent,
and every passing day, the past grows more distant.

Morning Sun

One Saturday, I found myself standing in the hall, transfixed by the sight of my children through the glass door. My eldest, clad in her favorite red dress, maple syrup still lining her chin, was bunching wildflowers carefully, removing their seeds, while my youngest, perched along the front steps, wearing what must have been a scalding-hot, synthetic, blue track-top and boots, picked at a scab on her knee. She started crying, and her mother raced over, escorting both girls towards the lawn. I was left with a view of peonies bobbing lightly. A few irises sagged in the shade. I could smell waffles, the dishes accrued in the sink. Suddenly, a shadow swooped over the lawn, probably a crow's, and a fat bee bobbed in the light.

Something about this moment captured me: the finitude of time. I tried to express it in verse, failing, of course. But something about this view through the panes stopped me and brought to mind a vision of my grandfather: his taut yellow skin, and the gleam on his cheek when I, at age six, beat him at a Memory game in his retirement complex in Florida. Did he recall, as I do now, his own predecessors—he never knew his grandfather, who never made it to the New World—and did he realize, as I do today, that humans invariably age?

What is it about light on the grass and the way it transfixes us suddenly; the bobbing of stems in the sun; the smell of freshly-opened peonies, with their watery leaves; the way a bee flickers over a lawn, and your children come and go—zealously, it seems—while your wife looks on in dismay?

I Can't Tell You Why

We eat fried eggs and English muffins
like every Sunday after church. You type a message
on your phone while I watch you. I dip toast
in the gooey yolk. The waitress brings coffee,
hovers over my almost empty cup, and asks,
Would you like more?
Yes. Please.

ELEANOR ALTMAN

How to Peel an Egg

She draws her index finger
down the recipe book index page
D's to E's
and lands on *Eggs*,
how to peel
closing her eyes
she returns to her
small kitchen
baked in spring's
morning light
to remember you
gently dropping the warm
peeled egg
from your palm to hers
she coddles it
as it warms
her hands
she looks up
to catch you looking back

ASHLYN AREND

Sonnet for an Equinox

I am barefoot on bathroom tile, can see
the bottle of disinfectant up on
a shelf above my head. It's bringing me
down and tonight my silence has been drawn
out soft, a dandelion, white chiffon
torn roughly by a gardening glove, a weed,
a nuisance, dispatched. Instead the clean lawn
is polka-dotted with persistent seeds,
small bugs congregating near light. Once we'd
seen them, when we were children, camping. Night,
a screaming mouth that swallowed smallest greed,
proximity. Love of the lethal light.

The world composed of atoms is a lie.
It's life and death to which we must comply.

Calle La Rueda

Over many years, the cobblestone streets had given way to the congested asphalt of the greater part of Quito. From where I sat at my kitchen table, the view out the window was disconcerting, like I had been kicked out of the heart of the city, only to feel as if I had never left it in the first place. The architecture of Calle La Rueda mirrored the style of our Spanish conquerors, houses that blended into each other, with flower pots at each delicate balcony, and wooden frames for the windows. How I wished to return to the patrimonial houses in the historic district, with their creamy blues and yellows. The buildings here suffocated each other as they absorbed the smog and pollution of Quito. They turned everything gray. Still, every night a fog descends over this entire city, not as a blanket, but as a veil that covers everything except the vague pinpricks of light that can be seen across all our mountains.

The doorbell's ring interrupted my thoughts.

"The caterer's here, can you let him in while I put this away?" I heard my mother call over her shoulder to Blanca, our maid. In a hurry, I tried to cover my photos with an envelope, but just as I moved to hide them from her sight, she walked in through the swinging door. She held a vase in one of her hands.

"Karina, could you take this?" she said, shoving the vase into my arms. Once her hands were free, she adjusted her jacket, and ran a hand through her hair. A strand had tangled up around one of her pearl earrings. For a moment, she studied me, and then her eyes moved over the photos. "You should clear this area. The caterers are going to need the space."

I set the vase under the table, and I started collecting my photographs, only touching the edges so that they wouldn't smudge.

"How was work today?" My mother asked. The caterers walked into the kitchen, and she turned to them. I was able to slip the photographs into their folder without further scrutiny. "You can place those platters over here. The drinks can go in the pantry until we need them. Blanca, can you show them how to use the stove and oven? Thank you, I'll be right out here once you're ready to set up in the dining room."

My mother pressed her hand against the swinging door, but before she walked through, she seemed to remember that I was still standing in the middle of the kitchen, holding my photographs against my chest. She

regarded me over her shoulder, and then said, “Kari, come with me. Let them have the kitchen.”

I followed her through the swinging door into the dining room. Javier was dressing the table, making sure to add three glasses of different sizes, two forks on the right side, and one napkin for each place-setting. The chandelier’s light glistened against the silverware, and reflected off the milky plates in front of each chair.

“Listen Karina, I wanted to talk to you before everyone arrives for tea. Your Tío Jorge is staying for dinner. He wants to offer you a job in his marketing agency. I think it’d be a good step up for you. You’d be working with larger companies, and you’d make some great connections, more money,” She paused when she noticed my expression. “I think it’d be a good opportunity.”

“Mama, I like my job,” I said. “It’s always interesting.”

“You mean it’s dangerous,” she retorted, checking the shape of each napkin, as she worked her way around the table.

“It’s not dangerous,” I responded. “I shouldn’t have told you about that.”

My mother paused, and turned to look me in the eye. “A child died a few weeks ago, and you saw his dead body. That’s not something a young lady ought to be exposed to. You should’ve never taken that job in the first place. It’s not safe.”

“So let me get this straight,” I said. “I can’t live by myself until I’m married, and now I’m not allowed to choose my own job?”

“Stop being ridiculous Karina,” My mother started massaging one of her temples with two fingertips. “Why does this job matter so much? It’s just a couple of pictures. It’s practically an extension of your hobby.”

“I’m in charge of documenting the transition,” I sighed. “I’ve told you this a thousand times. It’s important to demonstrate the renovation process for when the neighborhood opens to tourists next year. So much has happened there, it means something, it has to be recorded.”

When we were first hired by the ministry of tourism to investigate and gentrify the historic neighborhood in the south of Quito, we were met with varying levels of hostility by most of the inhabitants of La Rueda, but Lucia had opened her home to us. I think she welcomed the improvement to her neighborhood, and the business opportunity for her empanada shop. Lucia’s hands were strong from kneading dough, but delicate from folding ripples into the empanadas de viento. Her kind face was stressed beyond her years, and her clean clothes showed the wear of hard work. She had proved

invaluable when we first arrived, but even more so when she explained the politics of the neighborhood around her kitchen table later on. Rodrigo had stood to one side, frustrated by the lengths we'd have to take to befriend the local people. He had rubbed a lighter in one hand, and had typed into his cellphone in the other. He thought he was being discrete.

Rodrigo did not care much about this particular project, he preferred to work with museums and national exhibitions. For him, there was more "dignity" in those types of projects, which really meant that they were easier to explain to his family. He even made a point of wearing an expensive collared shirt to this visit, in contrast to his usual work polos.

Pablo, our boss, saw this as an opportunity to tie his communications company to the ministry of tourism. He sat at the kitchen table, nodding his balding head at everything Lucia mentioned, while he looked over to the government representative to gauge his reaction. I'm not sure he heard a single word Lucia said.

"You need to worry about two people," Lucia explained, passing a cup of coffee to each of us. "Mama Riña controls everything from El Mercado up to this street corner, and El Puma's territory starts here and runs down under the stone bridge. They compete with each other, and right now tensions are running high."

"Who's this Mama Riña again?" The government representative asked. He turned back through his notes, searching for the name. He was a middle-aged man, comfortable in his position, and after that first day, he decided to keep in contact via email only. He too had better and larger projects to work on.

"She controls the marketplace, and owns most of the houses on this block. Some of El Puma's men raided one of her trucks on Monday. She's been fuming ever since." Lucia studied the upheaval down in the streets from her window.

"Look, there he is," Lucia whispered. Rodrigo gave me a look as I got up from my chair, but I didn't care. I moved to stand behind her shoulder, my curiosity getting the best of me. La Rueda was crowded at this hour, filled with rushing people, and noise from street-carts.

"I don't see him," I said. "What does he look like?"

"That's him," Lucia pointed. I followed her finger to a decrepit man, slouched on the sidewalk, his body small, even amongst the children playing soccer in the middle of the street. He was missing a leg, and his ancient crutches lay next to him. He held up a plastic cup for spare change every time someone passed by him. He shook it up and down for emphasis.

"That's El Puma?" I asked, astounded. "But he's a beggar!"

Lucia laughed. I could tell that she had anticipated my reaction. “Don’t underestimate El Puma. He manages the drug trade in El Centro. More than half of those boys out there work for him.”

“They’re just children,” I whispered. They kicked the ball between them, avoided cars, and jumped in front of the people walking down the sidewalk. Their ball hit a street-cart, and the vender threw a bottle at them. It shattered near El Puma’s body, but the man did not react, other than to remove a piece of glass from his cup.

Lucia’s smile disappeared. “A fate I wish to spare my son.” I took out my camera and snapped a couple photos of El Puma and the children in the street. A part of me clenched up, but not out of shock, exactly. I couldn’t put my finger on the feeling curling inside of my chest.

It was only a few days later when Lucia took me on a special tour of Calle La Rueda. The more I investigated La Rueda, the more I saw this as an opportunity to learn about the people that lived here, to experience a life so far-removed from my own. To make some sort of a difference. But I was only the photographer. Rodrigo had scoffed when I asked him if he wanted to come along.

We stopped at every house, and Lucia told me stories about the people who lived inside. Lucia explained that most of the time, the inhabitants of La Rueda paid rent to Mama Riña, and agreed to keep quiet about El Puma’s dealings in the street. Lucia’s cousin, Maria, rented the candy shop from Mama Riña, but Maria’s son made the rest of their rent money working for El Puma. He sold gum and cigarettes on the street.

“It’s a never-ending wheel, una rueda sin parar,” Lucia said with a slight smirk, and a glance at the ceramic sign up on the street wall which read: Calle La Rueda.

As we started to walk over the stone bridge, the commotion below drew our attention away from her tour. A group of people had gathered under the bridge, and their voices grew from whispers into a heated debate. They were gathered around a body, but I couldn’t make out whether the person lying on the cobble-stone street was dead or alive.

“Que Pasa?” Lucia called down. Her voice echoed under the bridge, and the crowd froze. They looked around in alarm, their argument paused in panic, before they recognized Lucia above them.

One of the women spoke up, “It’s Fernandito. He’s dead.” Someone was crying in the crowd.

Lucia gasped, and drew a hand to her mouth in astonishment. “How’d it happen? Does Josefina know?”

“We’re trying to get his body to her, but we can’t let the police find him,” Another man voiced. “He belonged to El Puma. Someone tipped off the police, and they came after the boys two days ago. Fernandito’s been missing ever since. Turns out he tried to hide in the generator shack beneath the bridge. He got too close to a wire or something, because he’s been shocked dead. Poor Josefina, this was her only son...” Another wail raised in the crowd.

They moved apart just enough so I could see the small body of a boy, with dark hair and gangly limbs. He was probably one of the boys I had seen playing soccer out here not a week before. I couldn’t make out his face. The man nodded at us, and then they turned back to their task. They enveloped the boy’s body, and moved down the street in a hurry, scared to get caught.

“Dios Mio!” Lucia said, crossing herself twice. She turned to me, “You see, that’s the fate I wish to spare my son.”

There was a time when the white paint of this house shown in the afternoon sunlight, and the strings of a guitar or the deep sound of a saxophone drifted out into this street at all hours. But in its many years of disrepair, wooden shutters had been added to the windows unevenly, casting shadows that looked like discombobulated prison bars. Little by little the bare walls of this converted brothel had absorbed the smell of prostitution. It could still be tasted in the air now, a mixture of sweat and something almost fishy, rotten but stale at the same time.

Three girls remained on the soiled mattresses on the floor. They were the last to be evacuated from the brothel, but they seemed in no hurry to move. Though prostitution was legal in Ecuador, not one of the girls in front of me looked anywhere near eighteen. Their soft cheeks, and still-developing breasts gave them away, if their large eyes weren’t convincing enough. The girl nearest to me pulled her legs up under her chin, her dark bangs matted against her forehead. I could tell she was analyzing me from under her curtain of hair, but her expression remained blank. I hesitated for a moment, and then I took her picture.

The girl behind her turned to face me then, where I stood by the door, an invasive alien in their space. The disturber, and the disturbed. She had been playing with a dead moth on the floor. “Are they going to relocate the rest of them?” she asked in a low but raspy voice. Her hair was dyed wine red—secretary red, my mother would have said—but her roots were a deep black. Her finger pulled out one of the moth’s wings. Behind her, the last girl curled up on her side, and pretended to sleep. Her hair had come undone from her bun, and stringy stands covered her face from view.

"I suppose so," I whispered. I didn't know what else to say.

The red-haired girl nodded in slow motion. "And what about us?" she wondered out loud, maybe as a question for me, maybe just to herself. "What's gonna happen to us?"

"I'm not sure," I said after a few seconds. "They didn't tell me much. I'm just the photographer."

"It's all the same," the girl with bangs finally spoke. Her eyes remained flat, her chin settled into her knees. "They'll say that we're gonna be taken care of, but we'll end up in the streets. I just gotta make sure I look older next time."

Rodrigo came down the stairs. For once, there was no cigarette in his hand. He wrinkled his nose at the smell, and his face contorted with disgust. The girl with bangs studied his expression for a moment, and then said, "See something you like, guapo?"

"They're here for them," he addressed me. "The municipal people upstairs. They're talking to Pablo. Kari, could you come upstairs with me? Come on, please?"

I followed him up the stairs onto the cobblestone street outside.

"Why are you talking to them anyway?" He ran a hand against pants, as if he was trying to wipe something dirty away.

"It's my job," I answered. "I have to capture the process."

"Your mother would not be happy if she knew you were talking to prostitutes," Rodrigo answered. "And just so you know, your job is to take pictures. You're stepping out of line with these people."

"Why's that?" I retorted. "Because they're not society?"

"Exactly!" Rodrigo insisted. "People like us aren't supposed to befriend people like them." He waved his hands all over, and I could see that he wasn't just talking about the prostitutes, he was talking about all the people in La Rueda. He was talking about Lucia.

"You think you're so much better than them, but you have absolutely no idea what their lives are like. You can't understand what they've gone through. Their pain, their happiness, you know nothing!" I felt the heat in my cheeks, and my words came out in a huff.

Rodrigo snorted. "Don't be ridiculous, Karina. You come here thinking that you're doing these people a favor. You think that you're helping them get 'better lives,' but be realistic, we're only helping the government."

"We are helping them," I responded. "Lucia's going to get more customers in her empanada shop, and we're making the neighborhood safer, and we're helping the local economy."

“Oh, please!” Rodrigo shook his head. “If you go downstairs and ask any one of those putas, they’ll say that they were much better off without us sticking our heads in their business. They want to do it.”

“You’re wrong,” I insisted. “You’re so wrong. Don’t insult them.”

“You really think the government will help those girls?” Rodrigo asked. “Stop being so naïve, what we’re doing here is building an attraction for the gringo tourists, that’s all.” He turned away from me, and pulled out another cigarette. The girls came up the stairs then, escorted by the municipal officials. Pablo pretended not to see them. The girl with bangs granted me a small smile as our eyes met, and I knew she’d heard our fight. Her smile wasn’t exactly a thank you, it was more like she pitied my idealism, but appreciated my hope.

When I came back to the brothel a few weeks later, the girls’ intimate smell lingered to remind me of their young faces, barely out of childhood when I had met them. If stones could preserve memories, I was sure that these walls retained each and every one of them.

Something constricted in my throat. Breathing through my mouth, I tried to angle my camera to capture more of the narrow room with its deserted cots. I needed to move deeper into the space, but for some reason, I hesitated.

“Karina,” Rodrigo said, coming in through the wooden door. “Lucia is outside. She wants to talk to you.” He held a lit cigarette in his hand, and as he moved, ashes fell onto the floor.

I nodded once, and then walked back up the stairs onto the street outside. The day had grown gray. The wind picked up in streets, carrying litter down the sidewalk, as if it were leaves and not trash. Lucia stood by the door, holding a plastic jar filled to the brim with colada morada. The blackberry drink as thick as a smoothie, but richer in taste.

“Colada morada just like you like it,” Lucia said. “No pineapple, so your throat won’t swell up.”

“Gracias, Lucia,” I replied, taking the jar from her hands. I had never seen her without her apron.

“Tell your boss to come by my house later,” she frowned. “I need to talk to him.” There was a strange tension in the air, the street had emptied in the last hour.

Rodrigo stood a little apart from us, sucking in the last bit of his cigarette, as he tried to get ahold of Pablo on his cellphone. I took a quick sip from the jar of colada morada, while I studied the intricate facades that had grown familiar to me over the last few weeks. El Puma was nowhere

near his usual spot, under the shade of one of the balconies. The boys had all disappeared, and the street-venders were blocks away from where we stood, at the doors of the now-vacant brothel.

There was something about the silence in the street, something unusual. Lucia looked nervous, her eyes wouldn't stop returning to Rodrigo. I could tell she was impatient for him to finish smoking.

"I think we should get in—" Lucia began to say, when a woman burst through one of the doors at the street corner. For a second, I could focus on nothing other than the large kitchen knife she brandished in one of her hands.

"Who did it?" She shrieked, shaking the knife above her head. "Who's the hijo de puta that killed my son?"

"Vamos, Kari," Lucia murmured, pulling at my arm. Rodrigo backed away.

The woman shook her head from left to right, while she addressed the closed shutters, and tinted windows of her neighbors. Her body trembled, and her chest puffed out air as if someone had forced her head underwater, and finally she was allowed to breath, even for a second, just as the torture began again.

"Who did it!" She repeated, even louder this time. Her face turned red, and the sound ricocheted against the walls. "Cagate en tu puta mierda! Face me you coward!"

"Karina," Lucia whispered, with more urgency this time. She tried to drag me away again. "We need to hide, now!"

The cold light of the day glinted off the knife held in the woman's fist, and then her eyes met mine. The woman rushed towards us, like a bull charging in the ring. Rodrigo grabbed my other arm, and in two seconds, all three of us were behind Lucia's closed door.

We could still hear her heated screaming outside. Her steps echoed up and down the street along with her voice. Police sirens rang closer and closer to us. Lucia's son had come down the stairs, his youthful face pale in the dim light. He studied each of us with his dark eyes. Lucia's apron had come undone in our hurry to get inside.

"Mami," he said, "Que pasa?"

Lucia hesitated. She eyed her son as we walked upstairs, and then explained to us, "El Puma had one of Mama Riña's sons killed in revenge for tipping off the police about the boys."

Lucia pulled her son into her arms, and ran her fingers through his dark hair with delicacy and swiftness, as if she were petting a cat. As if she needed to reassure herself that he was okay. Lucia's eyes lost focus, but

seemed fixed against an empty spot on the wall. I could see her planning her next step, calculating what to do with the aftermath, in the back of her head. For a few minutes none of us spoke, and my heart stopped racing.

Rodrigo and I turned out the lights in the kitchen, and we stood in silence across from each other. Our eyes met, and I could tell from Rodrigo's expression that he had expected this to happen here, in the south side of the city, nowhere near the gated community where he lived. He had been proven right. This was nothing more than a story he would relate to his friends over and over to justify his belief that he was better than the people in Calle La Rueda. I wanted to say something about their humanity, about Lucia and her son. The young girls forced into prostitution. The candy vendor. The mother of the boy that got electrocuted. I wanted to tell him that only circumstances separated the direction of our lives. That he couldn't understand because he had never been forced to make these decisions. That this was not just another anecdote for a cocktail party, this was real life. But I couldn't speak.

"A fate I wish to spare my son," Lucia whispered from the shadows.

GARY BECK

Purchase Power II

Patrons of the art world
bid at auction
competing for masterworks
against rival appetites,
efforts rewarded
by acquisition,
applause of the crowd
for record prices,
feelings of possession
of a treasured item
won in economic battle,
soon to molder unnoticed
on crowded walls,
denuded of satisfaction.

TRUDI BENFORD

With Reckless Abandon

I hit send.
My words now in the system:
unprotected, irretrievable.

Before, they stretched
warmly nested in my head,
every syllable
right, confident, wanted.

Ice forms as I wait.

TIM BLEECKER

Six to Nine

You were driving my car,
I was numb on the passenger side.
I'd gone a bit too far,
but you didn't really seem to mind.

I watched rain climb the glass
until there was a red reflection.
The spins stopped and I asked,
"Are you an old soul? Just a question."

You looked me in the eye
then turned, contemplating quietly.
Your lips formed that smile,
(I'll admit it was reluctantly).

A moment passed away
with just a shimmering blink of green;
you looked at me that way
only a most blessed few have seen,

"Actually, I am."
I must say I was slightly surprised
as you reached for my hand;
truly content I slumped to my side,

but I glanced back at you
and thought, before slipping into sleep
which left this dream with you,
your eyes were moonlit pools, fathoms deep.

CREIGHTON BLINN

In Hindsight

The rage
Should have been obvious,
After all the teasing
& isolation,
The disruption at home
The restlessness at school
(See, how well I avoided any blame
By casting myself as a victim of circumstances).
Not that I understood any of this at the time,
As it's impossible to have a clear-eyed view of anything
While we experience it.
Distance is required for that fabled 20/20 hindsight
Which leaves us muttering,
"If only I'd been braver..."
Courage,
That most difficult of virtues.
Far easier to ignore our nagging doubts
Than truly wrestle with them.
Simpler to smile
And pretend to be the kind of kid,
Who would never smack another's head with a rock.
Yes, I pled ignorance as my defense,
In the heat of the moment,
I had forgotten the heavy object nestled away in my coat pocket,
Leaving me dumb-founded,
How an everyday winter vest
Could cause so much pain,
Only remembering later, the rock in my pocket,
Like a cocked gun waiting to go off.
And what of the aftermath?
I'm told that I was suspended, though, I have no recollection of it.
My strongest memory is spending the remainder of the school day
Alone, in a dark classroom,
Drawing dirty pictures.

If I'm truly honest with myself
& all this treasured 20/20 clarity,
I would admit how tricky all these questions are.
Was it only a matter of time until all that pent up aggression
Boiled over?
Did I gleefully embrace an opportunity to let loose?
Have I ever truly regretted any of it?
As I said, in hindsight,
It was all way too predictable.

HEATHER BELL ADAMS

The Topaz Creek Fugitive

Their property stretches down through the valley, three and a quarter sloped acres laced with late November frost, and in what ought to be a still morning, she detects movement. Past the edge of the pond, clear to the split rail fence marking the boundary some fifty yards out, something—Layla can't tell man or beast—darts behind an old oak.

Softly, so as not to wake her four-year-old daughter still asleep inside the house, she calls for Chase, her husband's Brittany.

The dog's nails click on the wooden porch floor until he pauses beside Layla, so close his fur sparks with static against her flannel robe. A shiver twitches across his hind leg. His brown eyes scanning, ears pointed and alert.

"What is it?" she asks. "What's out there?"

Chase lets out a low growl. A warning. Layla stares at the oak, so thick and wide her arms wouldn't come close to encircling it, until her eyes water. She convinces herself she's imagined the flash of charcoal gray, the crackle of fallen leaves underfoot. If something dangerous lurked nearby, Chase would have leapt off the front porch in a blur of speckled coat.

She tugs her robe over her chest. Clucking her tongue for the dog to follow, Layla turns away from the yard, toward the house. As soon as the door thuds closed behind them, she shoves the deadbolt into place.

The sound startles Ellie, who lets out a wail from her bedroom down the hall. Chase stays poised and alert by the front door while Layla hurries to scoop up her daughter, her hair matted with sweat despite the chill.

Small for her age, Ellie's weight in her mother's arms feels almost like nothing at all, no more than a bag of groceries. It's worried Layla, Ellie's lagging behind on the laminated growth chart in the pediatrician's office. But Layla's husband, Evan, always brushes it off.

He's a man of contradictions, letting some things go easily, other times wound tight with pent-up energy. He's got a chip on his shoulder about his own lack of stature, wears custom-made lifts in his work boots to appear taller. Drives a long haul on nothing more than a couple peanut butter and banana sandwiches and an insulated carafe of strong coffee, black as the shock of hair that swoops across his pale forehead.

If Evan were here—Layla stops herself, trying not to think about what she might have seen outside, glancing out the window at the hill beyond, yawning empty, jagged chunks of ice scattered across the small pond.

Besides, she says aloud, Chase's head tilting as though to better understand her, even if he were here, what would Evan do? As far as she knows, he hasn't touched his shotgun since the day they moved in when he propped it in the back of the hall closet.

With her free hand, Layla rubs the dog's head. She kisses the tips of her fingers and drops them to the knobby bones of his skull blanketed with velvety fur. Chase may have been meant for bird hunting, but Evan's never taken him. Hunting is something he thinks he ought to do, not something he actually has any interest in.

Ellie lifts her head from her mother's shoulder and points at the television. "Pirate Jake?" she asks, speaking around the thumb she's tucked in her mouth.

"Just while I fix your breakfast." Layla clicks the remote. But instead of a harmless cartoon, the image of a coiffed news anchor fills the screen, words like manhunt and fugitive emerging rounded and fulsome from her lipsticked mouth.

Layla sets Ellie down, ignoring her daughter's protest, and crouches in front of the television. The anchor's porcelain face is replaced by a map of western North Carolina, the roads around Topaz Creek marked in bold red. Trying not to panic, Layla looks out the window and then at the locked door, realizing their house sits in the bull's eye center of the crimson-edged circle.

* * *

The man leans against the oak, breathing heavily. Save for a scratch on his wrist and a sore nose, swollen like it's been punched, he's not hurt best he can tell. But he can't shake the feeling of danger, of being chased.

He fingers the frayed cuff of his gray barn jacket. It's too light for the weather, but it's all he has. He tries to remember if back home he might have a down-filled coat or maybe a wool scarf. But he can't work his way to an answer. The truth is, he realizes with a start, he doesn't know what home looks like or where it might lay.

Across the way, deeper into the holler, he spies wood smoke from a far-off chimney. He peers between the distant treetops until the shape of a house reveals itself, a log cabin huddled against the base of the mountain as if braced against a coming blow. It sparks no recognition in him, no memory good or evil.

Shivering, the man glances back to the woman's house and wonders where she's gone, why she appeared to begin with, sylphlike on the front porch, so fleeting she might have been a spirit. Even now, if he didn't glimpse movement at the window, he might have believed she was an apparition, that

the house—this one larger than the cabin, its clapboard painted a crisp dove gray—didn't exist anywhere but in his mind.

At his neck the man wears dog tags strung on a chain. He fingers the letters and numbers imprinted there and tries to make sense of them. Barclay Chester Gaines. He whispers the name out loud, then remembers he ought to stay silent. The name means nothing to him. It might be his own or that of a loved one.

He flexes his aching feet inside his boots and wonders how much time he has. His breathing has slowed. The woman and her dog have not re-appeared. Across the way, the cabin clings quietly to its patch of frost-covered ground, the smoke curling from the chimney the only sign of life. Although he can't find his way to specifics, the man feels pierced with urgency. He must hurry. He must hide. He needs to get away—but from what? Through his thin jacket, he rubs his spine against the rough bark, thinking.

The dirt road surely leads to town, the woods surrounding him to more of the same, dense thickets and steep slopes unmarked by trails, almost impenetrable even in winter when most of the branches are bare.

Faced with the choice, he's not sure what course to take. Besides a hot breakfast and warm clothes, the town is almost certainly crawling with sheriff's deputies, overlaying maps with carefully drawn grids and setting up road blocks. The man's brain registers this scenario with surprising certainty given that he can't figure out what's happened or how he's arrived at this place. He's just as certain that he wants no part of all that, no dealings with the law or anyone else for that matter.

When he turns out his pockets, he finds nothing. No money, no ID, no keys. As he untucks the dog tags from his collar for a second look, his breath catches at the dark brown stain on the metal. It could be anything. A fleck of ketchup, the remnants of a crushed berry or tobacco-tinged spit. But somehow the man knows, the realization blade sharp in his chest, that he's looking at dried blood.

* * *

Layla knows the mountains are good places to hide, that Eric Rudolph, the worst of them all, managed to spend more than five years in these parts, sleeping in the woods and pilfering food when people weren't looking. Year after year of search teams scouring the area and coming up empty.

Now she wants to believe the law is doing what it can, that today it will be enough.

“No Jake the Pirate this morning, at least not right now,” she tells Ellie, turning the television off. “I’ll bring you some pancakes and you can draw a picture, okay?”

She’s relieved when Ellie doesn’t complain and settles her at the kitchen table with her food, torn into bite-sized pieces, and a stack of paper and her favorite markers. Then Layla patrols the house, locking and re-locking the back door off the kitchen, double-checking the front which she’d deadbolted earlier, back when she saw—or didn’t see—something outside, testing the window locks to make sure they’re snug, pulling curtains closed and tilting blinds shut.

Evan will be home in two days, give or take. He doesn’t call much when he’s on the road. The regs forbid calls while he’s driving and he doesn’t like to pull over unless he has to. All of which means Layla doesn’t ever know exactly when he’ll show up.

If it’s true the fugitive is hiding out close by, Layla could take Ellie away somewhere, maybe to Weaverville where Layla’s dad has a place. But the notion of a car trip alone with her young daughter, who’s likely to wail when it nears naptime, seems worse than staying put.

Thinking about the Corns, the closest neighbors, gives Layla no small degree of reassurance. Justin Corn is a hunter through and through, a real one. He won’t have closed the blinds in their cabin. He’ll want to keep a look-out, might even have cameras set up, the kind that flip on when there’s movement close by. And his guns—Layla can’t begin to know how many, what kind, what damage they might inflict.

When Chase scratches at the front door to be let out, Layla pauses, hand on the deadbolt she’s so recently secured. Out front she can at least keep an eye on him, watching as he ambles down to the fence, hoping he’ll pass the oak by without a second thought.

Were she to let him out back, there’d be nothing but thick woods. So dark it’d be almost like nighttime only partway in. The dog likes to nose around back there, rooting out God knows what in the undergrowth. But Layla worries he might become ensnared, that today the woods might somehow swallow him whole.

She pushes aside any thoughts of the fugitive and lets Chase out in the front yard, urging him to hurry up. She means to go back inside to Ellie. But when Chase heads straight for the oak, letting out a sharp bark, the sound of it cracking like a shot across the yard, Layla finds that she cannot tear herself away.

Over her shoulder she calls for Ellie, asks if she’s all right, purses her lips until her daughter calls back that she’s almost done with her drawing.

“I’ll be there in a minute—can’t wait to see it,” Layla says. But only seconds later Ellie appears on the porch flapping the paper in the air and Chase approaches the oak, races forward, then sideways, as though lunging at some target on the other side of the broad trunk. His barking intensifies until it thunders in Layla’s head and Ellie lets go of her drawing to stuff her hands over her ears, then adds to the feverish noise with a startled scream as the wind snatches her paper.

Mother and daughter watch, stunned into immobility, as the wind carries Ellie’s drawing aloft, her lopsided sketch rendered in bright colors, and, more astonishing still, a man runs from the direction of the tree, Chase in fierce, teeth-bared pursuit.

* * *

The man’s thighs burn with effort and still he cannot gain enough speed. He stumbles over a root, losing valuable seconds. As he rights himself, he dares not look over his shoulder, but can sense the dog nearing, scrambling up the hill after him.

He makes for the side of the house, the woods beyond, when the little girl—she can’t be much more than a toddler—dashes down the front steps. The woman, he realizes, is watching him, not her daughter. Even in full stride he tries to cut his eyes in the girl’s direction as if he can force the woman to turn her head. It doesn’t work. She keeps her eyes trained on him. Meanwhile the girl chases her drawing, paying little mind to the ice-covered pond but instead springing toward it. He jabs his finger toward her and brings his palms together in a clap and screams.

“Look out—she’s—the water—”

The woman jerks to attention, hand at her chest, and she is coming down the steps, hurrying, but the man is closer, so much closer, and with little thought to how his pursuer will react, he swerves toward the pond. Arms outstretched, he lunges after the girl, her hair a mess of corkscrew curls, her tiny feet wearing only lavender socks and one half-off, her pink heel flailing as he lifts her, his own foot skidding through frost-covered leaves and into the shock of icy water.

He holds the girl, who has started to cry for her mother, as high as he can, away from the water soaking his pants. He cannot tell for sure if she’s gotten wet, but he doesn’t think so. Her nightgown—he sees now the pattern on it, white snowflakes fluttering across the pale blue flannel—feels dry to the touch.

As her mother nears, the girl kicks against his stomach with surprising strength and the Brittany, which has by then circled the pond once,

maybe twice, in a growling and barking frenzy, reaches a decision, launching himself at the man's back, chestnut brown ears flung back, incisors bared.

The searing, white-hot impact of teeth sinking into his hip makes him cry out and, without letting go of the girl, the man wrenches himself from the dog's clutches only to have him snap again.

The mother snatches the girl from his grasp and huddles her small body against her chest, whispering in a soothing voice. With something akin to relief, the man discovers the dog has this time only gotten hold of his pants leg. When the dog pulls, the hem rips off and his barking quiets so intent is he on chewing it to shreds.

Without thinking, the man touches the wound on his hip and brings his hand away stained with blood. The woman meets his eyes and opens her mouth to speak, but stops and looks up, startled. He follows her gaze, hip burning, his calf numb from the near-frozen water that splashed over his boot, only to find a man pointing a rifle in his direction.

"Justin, it's about time," the woman says and she rocks back and forth with her daughter still in her arms, the girl's cries softened into whimpers.

"What the hell? I heard all this racket and came quick as I could. Get in the house, Layla, for God's sake," Justin says, still pointing the rifle.

"I don't think it's him. He's not the man they're talking about on the news."

"And how would you know that?" His words are harsh, but the look he gives the woman called Layla seems threaded with tenderness.

"You see what he did, saving Ellie like that."

"I did—I'm not," the man says, his voice creaking with the effort of speech. He points toward the girl who raises her head from her mother's chest to peek at him, then turns away, shy.

Justin looks from the man to Layla and back again. "He looks a fair amount like the guy."

"Who is it they're looking for?" The man presses his jacket into his hip and stomps to bring life back into his leg, the whole time thinking it's not me. It's not me they're looking for, not me who's done wrong. He thinks of the softness of the girl's nightgown against his palm. Not me.

Justin coughs up phlegm and spits, rifle still aimed straight ahead. "Barclay Gaines, that's who they're looking for. The fugitive."

* * *

Layla walks right up to Justin, and with her free hand—the other wrapped around Ellie—knocks the rifle away. As it lands with a thud, Justin bends to retrieve it, but she touches his back to stop him. "I'm telling you,

it's not him." At the sharpness in her voice, the dog looks up. Once he's satisfied she's in no danger, he goes back to his chewing.

"What's he done?" the man who saved her daughter asks. He's fingering a set of dog tags around his neck. "Barclay Gaines. What are they saying he's done?"

Justin straightens, leaving the rifle on the ground. "Armed robbery. Felony murder. Shot up the Pack and Ship last night."

"My brother worked there. At the Pack and Ship. Barclay. It's him who's done this. Not me," the stranger says. Layla hears shock in his voice, stunned but certain, like pieces falling into place. He rips the dog tags off his neck and tosses them away.

Layla shifts Ellie's weight in her arms, pressing her close for warmth. She's always known, somehow, that it would come to this, that Justin, the neighbor she's known most of her adult life, who's pined after her from day one, would let her down, wouldn't be enough. Now all she wants is for him to leave, to go back home to his wife in their snug cabin across the way and let her and Ellie be.

She tells him as much, resting her foot on the rifle so he understands not to reach for it again.

"You don't know what could've happened if I hadn't of showed up." Justin shakes his head. "What if it had been him? Don't you watch the news?"

"I've seen plenty," Layla says. She flicks her hand toward the fence the same way she'd shoo a stray dog off her land. Justin pauses and, still shaking his head, trudges back down the hill the way he's come.

"He's likely to call the sheriff," she tells the stranger. "And he'll be back for his gun. You're better off getting away from here quick as you can."

He points to his hip. "I don't know how far I'd make it."

She sighs, knowing she at least owes him a place to hide for a bit, and tells him she'll be back.

Minutes later, having bundled up Ellie, Layla motions for the stranger to follow. Along the way, she picks up the discarded dog tags, reads the name Barclay Chester Gaines with something approaching fury.

"Why'd you have these if you're not Barclay Gaines?" When she thrusts the dog tags at him, he recoils as if he's been struck.

"Like I said, he's my brother." He tells her he'd forgotten but remembers now, the way his brother burst into the house they shared in town, ranting and raving about his boss, how he'd finally given him what he had coming.

"I picked up the dog tags to show him, to try to wrest Barclay back." He speaks so quietly that Layla guesses he's hoping Ellie, with her hat pulled

down over her ears, won't hear enough to understand. "The old Barclay I knew, before he went off to Iraq and came back different, the least thing setting him off."

Layla nods and points to an old tool shed around the side of the house. She gets him settled there on an old quilt and hands him a sack of food.

He nods. "I appreciate it."

"He hurt you? Your brother, I mean?"

He touches his nose and closes his eyes, whether in pain or remembering, Layla can't tell.

"Punched me, gave me a bloody nose." He shows her a scratch on his wrist. "Might've knocked me out. The rest is a blur. I'm not clear on how I got here. Guess I ran."

Layla frowns and wraps the quilt tighter around his legs.

"What's your name anyway?" she asks as she straightens again, reaching for her daughter's hand in its puffy mitten.

"Cullen Gaines."

"Alright then Cullen. Rest here. Eat some. I'll do what I can to keep them away," Layla says, thinking of Justin Corn and the sheriff's boys. As she and Ellie head for the house again, she's surprised when snow begins falling, dampening their shoulders.

* * *

She's promised to do what she can, but Cullen figures Layla is no match for his brother were he to have followed him here. In his mind he tries to map out what course Barclay would've taken. It's at least possible that Barclay has lost interest in his little brother, that his rage at Cullen for taking the dog tags has been snuffed out, replaced by a desperate need to save his own hide. Still, Cullen can't shake the idea that he ought not rest yet, that he's not done running no matter how much he'd like to be.

After he's eaten all but scraps of the food Layla brought, he wipes his hands with the quilt, then looks over his palms and fingernails. Now that his memory has come back, pieces of his life—his life before—filter through Cullen's mind as though unearthed from riverbed silt. His job as a brick mason, the satisfaction of fitting a piece of stone into a bed of mortar where it will settle in place. Their mother at the nursing home off Sugarloaf Road, the way she picks at the blanket on her lap, nervous, when the lawyers on Law & Order are waiting for the jury's verdict. Cherie, the woman he sees from time to time, the tiny, perfectly round freckle on her left breast, the color of milk chocolate and nearly as sweet-tasting.

He can't imagine going back. Not after everything that's happened. Not to the house anyway, he thinks as he drifts into sleep.

It's grown dark outside, light feathers of snow blown under the door of the tool shed, when Cullen hears tires crunching over the gravel and the unmistakable roar of a motor where the driveway curves alongside the shed. He squints through the cracks in the wood and tries to make out who's coming, but the headlights blind him. Letting the quilt drop to the dirt floor, he groans and pulls himself up to standing.

By the time the motor quiets and a door creaks open and slams shut, Cullen has wedged himself into the corner. Through the nearest crack in the wood, he watches as a man slips inside the house through the back door.

* * *

After taking the food out to Cullen, Layla and Ellie spend the rest of the day inside. Ellie draws picture after picture of a stick figure man holding a baby and Layla isn't sure whether this should worry her. She's hoped the day's events won't have stuck with Ellie, that they haven't made any lasting impression on her young mind. But the drawings say otherwise.

Outside a helicopter hovers, then rumbles away. Layla looks through a gap in the curtains, wondering if it's blue lights she sees flashing in the distance or her imagination. She won't turn on the television, not while Ellie's still awake.

"Hey, sweet girl, who's that?" Layla points to Ellie's latest drawing.

"The nice man," Ellie shrugs and adds dots of orange to his hair.

Layla kisses the top of her daughter's head, then combs out her curls with her fingers until Ellie begs her to stop. Layla might promise never to hurt her, to always keep Ellie safe. But, thinking of how suddenly a storm can come up, the fickle nature of not just men, but people, all people, she guesses such a promise would be meaningless. Look at today. Layla let her gaze shift for one second and Ellie might have died.

Close to midnight, Layla lies in bed unable to sleep. The television on the dresser is turned to the news. She props an extra pillow under her head to see the screen, but keeps the sound muted. Justin Corn is being interviewed live—out on the far edge of his property, over the ridge. He points at motion sensors in the treetops, gesturing with his hands as he talks, a satisfied brightness in his eyes.

Even in her relief, Layla knows her husband won't like Justin Corn being involved. His heroics, his bearded face on the news, will gnaw at Evan, she's sure of it. Chances are he won't have heard of it yet, making a point to avoid talk radio in favor of bluegrass to stay awake.

On the screen, a long-haired man, handcuffed, ducks his head as he's pushed, limp as a rag doll, into the back of an armored van. Somebody else might think he favors Cullen, but Layla doesn't see the resemblance.

When she hears the clink of the back door being unlocked, the whine of its hinges as it opens, Layla bolts upright, breaking into a cold sweat even though she knows it can't be Barclay Gaines, that he's been caught and taken away.

Evan appears in the doorway, asking if she's awake, murmuring about the snow.

Tail wagging, Chase squeezes past her husband and settles at the foot of the bed with a sigh.

"We're alright," Layla says, her voice hoarse with tiredness. "Come to bed." For now she decides against telling him about Justin, about Cullen Gaines either. She beckons Evan toward her so he doesn't look at the television. "Come to bed," she says again.

Layla watches in the dark as her husband undresses, leaving his clothes in a heap on the floor. The firm leanness of his shape, the coiled fierceness she guesses might pulse within his chest. Evan climbs in beside her and she fits her face in the crook of his neck. The rich coffee smell of him. She'd forgotten it.

* * *

Cullen stuffs the leftover food in his pocket. The wound on his hip still smarts and he squares his shoulders to steady himself.

Outside, he hunches against the falling snow, hesitates when he finds the discarded rifle. He doesn't know if the cold has ruined it. Barclay might know such a thing, but not Cullen. He picks it up anyway. Just in case. With the toe of his boot Cullen nudges a piece of paper, weighted down only partway by the snow. By the light of the moon he can see what might be a pirate, a hat propped on his oversized head. Smiling. Maybe dancing. Cullen folds the drawing and tucks it inside his coat.

If Barclay is in the house, Cullen has to warn Layla, get the little girl out somehow. The dog might give him trouble, but he's got the scraps of food.

Light flickers from one of the windows and Cullen follows it as though a beacon, setting the rifle aside when he finds a stack of firewood. Moving quickly, he drags the wood closer to the window. Once the pile is high enough, he steps up, hip screaming, to look inside.

At first Cullen can't work out what he's seeing, the shadowy shapes moving. He wishes he could reach the rifle from his perch. Instead he looks

in the window again, blinking until the light from the television reveals a bare back encircled by a woman's hands, the movement on the bed at once furtive and desperate. Despite the chill in the air, his cheeks burn.

In his haste to get away, he turns abruptly and the stack of firewood shifts beneath his feet. Cullen leaps to the ground, trying not to cry out as the gash on his hip tears open again. The logs tumble, a sound like thunder, and the dog inside lets out a sharp warning.

Too late Cullen figures the dog would have done the same had it been Barclay who slipped into the house. He ought to have known it wasn't him. An overhead light blinks on, then another. Cullen starts to run for the woods.

He's still running when a man clatters out the back door, half-dressed, fumbling with a shotgun. Behind him Layla yells no. Paying her little mind, the man plows ahead.

Cullen plunges into the woods, veering one way, then another. But before long he's struck clear to the bone with tiredness. Blood seeps through his pants from the wound on his hip, his lungs heaving in the cold air.

Bent at the waist, Cullen crouches behind an oak tree, smaller, so much smaller than the one he'd found at dawn on the other side of the clapboard house, his mind then as blank as a snow-covered field. The bliss of not knowing.

As the first shots ring out, Cullen looks back at the house one last time, what must be the little girl's room lit up now, glowing pink, Layla on the bed with her arms wrapped around her daughter like a promise, shielding her from whatever might come. He lifts his face to the sky and lets the snow blanket it until he can see nothing but white.

ACE BOGGESS

Did Someone Flip a Switch on the Reality Machine?

—a Facebook post

Mid-December, camellias in bloom,
bold poppy red & wielding golden scimitars
amidst the wasteland of branches
gray as elephants. Weather
has made a mockery of nearness to winter.

Who'd expect new life in that hour death likes best?
Insects have come from their netherworld
to frolic & fornicate, taste fresh brandy.

Somewhere people suffer
through muddled, middling cold.
Not here where chill should feel at home.

As for flowers, they've put on their lip gloss &
thigh-high leather boots,
heading out on the town for cocktails &
dice—cocky, passionate,
unafraid the house always wins.

JONA COLSON

Prayer

They gathered around the table
like lambs bleating in the dark.

They hooked their hands in a circle
and waited for an answer or an ambiguous

reply from a child absent flesh and bone.
There were sudden sharp sighs when

a soft cry sounded far in the corner
and a breeze wafted onto the table.

Perhaps the hint of an instruction,
or the beginning of a belief,

or simply a surge of relief when,
in the end, there was no language

except in bellows.

SCOTT DOCKERY

Down on the Floor

Her heart
stopped
while hanging clothes
and she went
down on the floor.

In the 10
minutes
before he came in the door
and saw her
down on the floor
the house was
gifted a cathedral quiet,
stilled
by the death of a noble.

He came in the door and
saw her
down on the floor
and his mouth
opened,
and her phone beside her
down on the floor
lit blue
with a daughter's
text
'I arrived safe
see you tomorrow.'

HOLLIE DUGAS

The Secret Lives of Figs

Tiny wasps curl
their legs in all directions, coming
forth from the sore red
fruit, leaving their brothers
to die in the pulp
where they have once danced.
What it must be to emerge
from the bellied fruit, and crawl
atop the hard-shelled pod.
How the fig needs
the wasp and baby needs mother.
I imagine Schiele in a basement,
considering, perhaps, dying
does make people immortal.
I can hear him speaking
from his sea of blood and flower:
*My mother is a very strange woman he says,
She doesn't understand me in the least
and doesn't love me much either.*
The fig, too, has a small opening,
not quite big enough for passage;
the queen wasp loses
small bits of her wings
when she tunnels to the center
of the fruit to leave her offspring.
And I think, this is how a world goes,
how our need to survive can be terrifying,
how the fig is not like an apple,
as its flower blooms *inside*,
like the unborn child
in Schiele's *Dead Mother*,
a knot of innards and flesh,
growing little strings of teeth.

GARY GALSWORTH

Early On

Early on my heart broke, it's true. Broke into big and little pieces
like happens when an empty bottle of cheap wine gets tossed.
Shards, slivers, and chunks of glass spreading out from where it lands.
In a larger piece, a bottom piece, tart red drops collect.

Eventually this array, this eyesore, is swept up and poured into a garbage can.
It finds its way onto a garbage scow in tow till, at twenty miles out or so,
it's dumped into the ocean.

Amidst this deluge of leftovers and lousy planning, rushing under or
struggling to stay afloat, the pieces of the wine bottle fall and scatter.
Some pieces plunge to the bottom—cleaned and rinsed in the fall. Others
twist and skim like small fish shining where the light strikes them.
Until all dance or fall to the sandy floor, and the ocean waltzes over them.
It waltzes over everything and some pieces waltz with it.

Seventy-four years into this waltz, I am not surprised but pleased to find
my heart again, still in pieces, so many pieces, but lovely and pure once more.
Look there, sea glass on the eastern shore.

CHRISTOPHER ALLEN

Interrupted

The squatting is Dr. Frank's idea, to get me into Trey's eight-year-old field of vision. My face is a burst of forced positivity. His copper eyes are his mother's, the sad slope of his eyebrows mine. Maria died two years ago. It didn't surprise me that Trey took it philosophically. He never cried about anything. We joked about it, called him our little sociopath until his kindergarten teacher called the house to suggest we choose another nickname.

Trey hasn't said a word since the accident. I'm trying to react calmly, but that's hard when he won't leave his makeshift fort under the trampoline in the yard. A few weeks ago, a boy in Trey's class was killed on the back of his brother's Honda. Bobby died instantly, the older brother the same day in the hospital. The mother committed suicide a week later, and the father moved to Ft. Myers to "reflect." He was a golfer. Everyone left—Trey too in his own way.

Trey's second-grade classmates made up stories: severed limbs, buckets of blood, brains in the trees. A head rolling down the street like a pumpkin prank. After one of the fathers at the May PTO meeting recounted his son's story of Bobby's guts wrapped around a telephone pole, I took Trey out of school and started taking him to see Dr. Frank. After a couple weeks of me doing all the talking while Trey built a Lego wall around himself, Dr. Frank suggested we continue our talks on the telephone "only when absolutely necessary." I put him on speed dial.

* * *

"Trey—"

"—will forget, Mr. Edwards. He'll go on to third grade, play soccer, become a Cub—"

"Not Trey, doc. He's different. We've always known that. He's porous." Like a sponge that can absorb but can't wring itself out. "I found this website—"

"You Googled 'Is my kid crazy?' again."

"I found this list of personality disorders, thought maybe—"

"Mr. Edwards, Trey does not have a personality disorder."

"I respectfully disagree."

"That's your right, but I'm the guy with the 300-thousand-dollar student loan and the MD after my name."

"There's got to be some medi—"

"I won't prescribe it."

"He's obviously depressed."

"He's mourning, Mr. Edwards."

"He's catatonic."

"He's not catatonic."

"He's something."

"OK, Mr. Edwards. Look, you're not ready to hear this, but Trey and Bobby were special friends."

"Bullshit. I never even met the kid."

"I didn't say you and Bobby were special friends. Can you hear me? Your radio's kind of loud."

"I'm listening." But I'm also mouthing the words to "Firework."

"Trey loved Bobby."

"Trey is eight years old," I say. "What are we talking about?"

"Could you please turn Katy Perry down?"

"I'm not good at riddles, doc. Just say what you mean."

"Trey and Bobby were like boyfriends."

"Oh, fuck off. Did you tell my eight-year-old son he was gay?"

"No. But Trey's teacher—"

"—made Cs in her child psychology courses. I checked her out."

"—kept a record of their interactions. 'On numerous occasions,' she writes, 'I have observed Trey and Bobby involved in experimental touching. They mostly hug but sometimes engage in what appears to be intimate contact. Experimental touching is common, but Trey and Bobby appear to be mutually affectionate.' The word 'affectionate' is underlined. And, to be fair, it's misspelled."

"Hell, you're telling me this bumpkin thinks Trey is gay? You think he's gay? He's eight!"

"I'm telling you Trey has lost a person very dear to him. I'm 43, Mr. Edwards, and even I'm not sure how gay or straight I am."

"Well I'm 100% straight!" A few beats pass.

"Mr. Edwards, you'll do your son—and me—a big favor if you avoid labels like 'gay' and 'straight'. Words like 'love' and 'special' are fine. Trey has just lost the most important person—"

"Bull. Shit."

"Point taken, but Trey hasn't spoken to anyone in how many weeks?"

"There's the cat." Under the trampoline, Trey's got the neighbors' cat trapped in his arms again. Beyond the trampoline horizon a moving van

pulls up to a house down the street. A woman—a real head-turner with long brown hair and a perfect ass—waves an arm of bangles at a couple of stout teenage movers who are just now hopping out of the van. Like puppies.

Dr. Frank hasn't stopped talking. "—that Victorian spouses mourned for two years, I think. How are you doing? With your own anger issues? Mr. Edwards?"

The new Bon Jovi song comes on, so I turn the volume back up. She must be a model—the new neighbor. Her league of hot is visible from four houses away. Maybe from space.

"Mr. Edwards?"

"Maria was a major pain in the ass at the end. I'm not over it. That what you want to hear?"

"Any memory—"

"—is a good memory. I know, I know. Blah blah blah." I hang up. If I stand just right at the kitchen window, I can watch Trey and the woman in the same frame. Her bangles clink together every time she raises her arms. It's subtle from a distance, like a percussion instrument in the background of my 10 in a row from 107.5 The River.

* * *

When our Georgian weather turns warm, Trey starts sleeping under the trampoline. I try everything—Guitar Hero, pizza, threats of spankings—to get him back in the house. At first he stays in his room, but then he sneaks back down to the yard in the night.

He's out there now under the trampoline, strangling the cat. I stand at the kitchen window, drink my coffee. Karen from next door is folding out a lounge chair on the porch. She comes over to watch Trey when I'm at work.

"Dr. Frank's number—"

"—is on the fridge. Big orange numbers, Mark. We'll be fine." She stretches out on the chair and takes out a fat supermarket romance novel. "Won't we, Trey!" She doesn't look up for an answer.

In July I officially recognize the fort as Trey's space. I construct tarp walls and make a bed for him so he won't have to sleep on dewy grass. I put peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, orange juice and a Flintstone inside the fort every morning. It scares me shitless to leave him in the yard at night, but Dr. Frank said he'd call child services if I locked him in his room again.

"Hey, Tiger." I keep it up. I squat. I let him know Daddy is here if he wants to talk, play or draw or sing—all the things you're supposed to do with mourning kids—but the memory of that dead kid has jammed a pause button in him. It's crazy and not right, and I have no idea what to do.

“Stay with him,” Dr. Frank says the next day on the phone.

“You think I’d give up on my kid? What the—”

“No. I mean stay with him. Physically.”

“Like move into the fort?”

“It is big enough, isn’t it?”

“I guess.”

“It’s July. It’d be like camping.”

“Uh huh.”

“You’d stop worrying about him at night. And you might not have to call me so much. And you’d have a chance to—”

“God, all right.” I hang up.

My sleeping bag is under a sack of charcoal in the basement where I hurled it after my final camping trip with Maria. Unfurled, it’s a fungal time capsule of mildew and old sweat. The trip was supposed to be a romantic get-away weekend. It rained. We spent forty-eight torrential hours wrapped in our sleeping bags, eating cheddar on white bread and gnawing our relationship down to a bare, shiny bone. If we’d known about the cancer, maybe we’d have been nicer to each other. Maybe not.

“All memories are good memories,” I say ironically, holding a bottle of apple-scented fabric softener over the washer until it’s empty and there’s an apple-pie-sized puddle of green sludge on the sleeping bag. I sit in the kitchen while it washes and jam to PINK, Gossip, Van Halen, Beyoncé, anything loud. When I show up at the fort in the evening with the sleeping bag, a pillow and a battery-operated radio, Trey scoots over and pats the ground beside him.

The dim space smells of plastic, Trey and now artificial apples. All together it has that sweet old urine tang of a men’s public toilet. When I think of my son sitting out here in silence for hours on end, my eyes well up. I want to punch something.

A light weight on my shoulder makes me jump. It’s Trey’s hand. He holds it there like a faith healer.

“A little music to help us get to sleep?” I say.

Trey pulls his sleeping bag over his head.

I put the radio under my pillow. A woman is singing something about being born to survive, uncomplicated and loud. I fall right to sleep. When I wake up, the fort is cold but bright where the sun has worked its way through the holes in the tarp. The radio is dead. This is going to take a lot of batteries.

* * *

The cat comes every day now, clings to Trey until its stomach growls.

“He’ll be back tomorrow,” I say one night.

Trey turns and smiles—the sort of sad, fatherly smile that says you can’t make promises for cats.

“You’re reading too much into it.” Dr. Frank’s on speaker phone.

“What else am I supposed to do?”

“Don’t do; just be.”

“Save that shit for Facebook, doc. Look, Trey needs—”

“What does your son need, Mr. Edwards?”

“Could you please call me Mark?”

“That would be awkward.”

“More awkward than calling me Mr. Edwards?”

“I have a full day, Mr. Edwards. What does Trey need?”

“Friends his age, someone to play with, to get his mind off—”

“Absolutely. He needs a new friend.”

“New friends. I said friends.”

“What about his classmates?”

“Not a chance. I don’t want them terrorizing him with more stories of mutilated Bobbys. And it’s summer. They’re all in Florida.”

“Church?”

“Maria was the religious one. She’s dead.”

“The neighborhood?”

“Also Maria’s department.”

“I don’t suppose you have any friends?”

“You done?”

“Just be there for him. I have another client now. Try to get through today without calling me.” He hangs up.

I’ve taken a leave of absence from my job at State Farm, bought tubs of peanut butter and jelly (the swirled kind already mixed) and hunkered down to be here for my son whenever he decides to speak or scream or cry but all he does is sit there like a monk on a mountain. I am not enough. Trey needs someone who can storm the trampoline fort with him, someone who doesn’t have to do so much damn squatting.

A couple days later I find myself scouting the neighborhood, looking for kids to play with my stalled-out kid, someone who won’t use Trey’s silence as a weapon against him. Someone gentle.

“Which is creepy. What am I doing?”

Dr. Frank sighs into the phone. “Well for one thing, you’re thinking labels again. Instead of trying to find companionship for your son, I think

what you're saying is that you're going door to door looking for little boys who look gay."

"I knew you'd go there."

"It's not a bad idea, actually. A gentler boy would be a better friend to Trey right now. Gentler is not synonymous with gay, though. That's kind of a 1990s concept of homosexuality. But your own twisted preconceptions of what 'gay' means might pay off in this situation."

"So...good, right?"

"No," says Dr. Frank. "Not good. Mr. Edwards, Trey will get through this in his own way."

"Genius." He hangs up before I can.

I continue my afternoon walks, looking for "companions". A few afternoons later, I spot a little boy sitting on the front steps of my hot new neighbor's house. The boy has a lonesome look about him, and he's crying big, sappy tears. He's perfect. I keep walking, but the next day I come back and ring the doorbell.

The woman who comes to the door is polished in that too-perfect Desperate Housewives way. "Yes?" she says from behind the screen door.

My heart is pounding through my shirt. "Hi, um, my name is Mark Edwards? Thought I'd introduce myself? My son and I live just down there?" I point. "That brick one that looks like a boat?" Oh god, I've become that guy who speaks in questions.

"Nice to meet you, Mark Edwards. You win the prize. You're the first."

"People sort of keep to themselves around here?"

"But you're not one of them?" Her question flips up at the end. An exaggeration. She's making fun of me, which actually calms me down a bit. "Just so you know," she says, "I have life insurance, I don't believe in organized religion, and my vacuum cleaner is the best my money can buy. Although if you're selling alarm systems, maybe we can talk."

"Oh, no. I'm not selling anything."

"Well, what's up, Mark Edwards? You look...concerned."

"Ah, all the men in my family look worried. It's something in the slope of our eyebrows."

"It was cuter without the explanation. So...?"

"Yeah, well..." I need to talk about Trey so badly I'm standing at a too-perfect stranger's door—hyperventilating. I speak quickly before I lose my nerve or faint. "You probably haven't heard about the motorcycle accident a couple of months ago, but my son was very close to the little boy who died, and since then he's been having problems. He hasn't spoken to

anyone in a long time, and I was just wondering if, maybe, he...I saw your boy here yesterday...I mean I saw you have a boy my son's age and...just thought maybe...you know..."

"You want them to play together."

"God. Thank you."

"Sure. Bring him over." She winks as if all of this is just a means to an end. She has the whitest teeth.

"My kid's name is Trey."

"Justin!" Her voice carries to a bedroom somewhere at the back of the house, and the little boy I saw the day before comes running. "This is Mark," she says. "He has a big boy your age, and he wants to play sometime. See, I told you they'd like you."

Justin nods, but he's also doing that hide-behind-Mommy thing that says he expects a catch.

"Actually," I say, "could Justin come to our place? I'm not sure Trey would come to a strange house right now. And he's kind of attached to the trampoline in the back yard."

"He's attached to it?"

"Oh no. What I mean is—oh god, no—he likes to play under the trampoline. It's a safe place for him. Like a fort. He's not chained to it. Not physically anyway. I should shut up."

"A fort, Mommy."

She hugs Justin to her leg. "I think it'd be better if Trey came here. I mean, I don't really know you."

"True, but I don't know you either." I laugh. "How about you, your husband and Justin all come over on Sunday?"

The knowing smile again. "I just got divorced. My name is Andrea, by the way."

"So we're on the same page," I say, "this is all about Trey. I lost my wife to cancer a couple of years ago, and I'm just not ready for—"

"But your son"—she stops smiling—"should be ready to play cowboys and Indians and laugh at Sponge Bob only a few weeks after his friend's death?"

"OK. Ouch. Gotcha." I start to leave.

"Wait, Mark." She opens the screen door. "Sunday sounds like a great idea. We can do that. Ten o'clock?"

I try to look relieved, but my sloping eyebrows just make me look helpless.

"You're a good father," she says.

I keep telling myself this on the walk home, where I find Karen sound asleep on her lounge chair and Trey napping with the cat in the fort.

I start to call Dr. Frank to make sure I'm doing the right thing, but I put the phone back in my pocket when I see Trey stirring. It's past time for his afternoon snack.

I crawl into the fort and make us a PBJ and potato chip sandwich. Trey used to laugh so hard when he ate this improbable explosion of sugar, salt and calories that he'd spit gobs of it all over the kitchen floor. Today he nibbles at it and stares at nothing. If I'm such a good father, why can't I jumpstart this kid?

"I have a surprise for you." I put new batteries in the radio and switch it on. "Good as new. You've always loved surprises, right?"

Trey stops chewing.

"On Sunday. You'll see. It'll be fun." I tousle his hair. "My little sociopath."

He swallows, takes another bite, chews furiously, swallows again.

"Sorry. I always say the wrong thing, and I'm trying so hard to say the right thing, Trey. I really want—"

He puts his hand on my shoulder and pinches his eyes shut as if performing some sort of mental incantation. Like he's praying.

"He might be praying." It's late in the evening. Dr. Frank's voice is raspy and muddled with alcohol. "Or maybe—and this is just a hunch—he wants you to shut the hell up."

"Oh."

"Sorry. I'm tired. So you've found a replacement for Bobby, have you?"

"Ah, good. You read my email. I promised myself I wouldn't call yesterday."

"Does Trey know what you're up to?"

"I told him I had a surprise."

"How did he react?"

"That's when he started praying for me to shut up."

"He really is a sweet, old soul."

* * *

Sunday morning I ask Trey to take a bath, and he does. I ask him to get dressed, and he does. But when Justin and Andrea show up in our back yard, he refuses to come out of his fort. Dragging him out would ruin everything. The last thing I want to do is embarrass him in front of strangers.

"What's wrong with him?" Justin shouts, because eight-year-olds aren't so worried about embarrassing each other.

"He's not ready," Andrea says before I can answer.

“Why?” asks Justin.

I interrupt. “Maybe we should go inside the house.”

“He lost a friend,” Andrea says, ignoring me.

Justin nods and inspects the fort for this kindred spirit. “Can I play?” he shouts toward the trampoline, then turns to his mother. “Can I?”

While Justin searches his mother’s eyes for permission, we wait for a sign from Trey.

“Maybe next Sunday,” Andrea says loudly.

* * *

“You did the right thing,” says Dr. Frank on the phone the next day.

“It didn’t work.”

“Sometimes the right thing doesn’t work, Mr. Edwards.”

“Then what the hell makes it right? I can’t take a leave of absence from my job indefinitely.”

“You said a neighbor was looking after him.”

“She’s not the best.” Karen’s asleep on her lounge chair, mouth wide open. A light rain is beginning to speckle her sky-blue t-shirt a darker blue.

“In a couple of weeks you’ll be sending him back to school anyway, right?”

How can I send him back to school where his classmates will tease him, where his teachers will expect him to speak, to answer questions, to ask questions? I have to take more control. I hang up on Dr. Frank and charge out to the trampoline, past snoozing Karen. It’s pouring now. Somehow—by shaking or spanking or screaming—I have to put an end to this.

“We have to talk, Trey.” I don’t try to sound positive as I crawl, soaking wet, into the fort.

Trey’s lying on his side with his face to the tarp wall. In the past three months he’s grown an inch, and he’s also a bit plumper since he’s been living on peanut butter, grape jelly, potato chips and Flintstones. The radio is lying on its side, batteries dead again.

I sit down next to him. “And that means you too. I’m done with this shit.”

He rolls over to face me.

“You’re starting school in a couple of weeks, and I’m not going to keep you home. Do you understand what that means? When school starts, you’re going. That’s all there is to it. Trey, do you understand? Nod if you understand. Anything. I’m trying so hard here. It’s OK to mourn—or whatever you’re doing. For a while. But—god—at some point—”

Trey reaches up, puts a forefinger to my lips and closes his eyes. Once the sound of my voice has died away, the rush of rain fills the fort.

I bat his hand away. “Listen, Trey—”

He puts a hand over my eyes and says, “Shhhhh.”

With my eyes closed and the only sound the din of rain on the trampoline, I see Maria sobbing, trying to cut rock-hard cheddar cheese with a plastic knife, then the moment I first noticed her eyes in our Western Civilization class, then hiking in British Columbia before we got married—we caught ourselves smiling at the freshness of it all, screwed right there behind a copse of pine—her decorating Trey’s first birthday cake, us singing “Hit Me With Your Best Shot” at karaoke falling-down drunk and so happy, so satisfied, so—

“I’ll be right back.” I run to the house, rain slicing my face like acid, to get the twelve-pack of long-lasting batteries on the kitchen counter.

ERIC GREINKE

White Nights

Here in the North
the nights are white.
The cloudless sky
glows from starlight
unobscured by city glare.
The looming moon
is a white stone.
Green grass looks yellow
in the muted moonlight.
Luminous white flowers
sing a soft moonsong
to fireflies sparking
tips of tall grass.
A snowy owl
releases its long note,
adding a red spark
to the dark canvas.

JUDITH GRISSMER

We Want to Believe

My small granddaughter
searches among broken shells
for mermaid messages. A friend
faces her driftwood talisman seaward
to summon the lover of her dreams.
My fortune becomes a gaggle of dragons,
nine heads great and small, washed
ashore from an undersea domain.

We make our pilgrimage to the edge
of the sea, scan white-capped waves
for dolphins, seek each sunset's form—
a gift of geese on crimson sky,
indigo reflected on wet sand.
Lifting our eyes to the heavens,
we hunger for shooting stars,
shiver at night for a glimpse
of the pale silver moon.

Today I follow
a pair of yellow butterflies
that dance in December air—
brief sparks that flare—

and are gone.

MEGAN NEMISE HALL

Oral History

My grandfather would say
deceit was planted in the coalfield,
bound to the earth and hardened,
waiting for extraction,
to make new hands unclean.

That it spread its way into this family.
Leaving only toxic, black spittle
to settle in the cracks of our faces
when we smiled.

My grandmother would say
even the last breath of a life
isn't worth the acknowledgment of a first.

That if I had known to listen,
I might have heard a girl's name
in the spaces of her breathing.

Her name, small and soft,
like the way a small fist,
fingernails just beginning to bud,
latches onto the warmth of touch.

My cousin says
she doesn't like
driving past coalfields.

That she can never quite get
the grit out of her teeth.

CAROL HAMILTON

Flemish Light

When we came to the room with landscapes,
his gallery talk on Golden Age sketches
informed us that for the Dutch, sunny days
were always painted, as they were so rare.
My love of Dutch art, still with me
from first grade, and my year living
in Scottish weather leapt and swept
to form a whirlpool in my mind.
I knew the depths of winter darkness,
the damp miasma suffered on opposite sides
of the North Sea. My latitudinal linking
of weather misery was sealed
by our cattle boat crossing from Dundee
to Rotterdam, shared with the pony
in the boat's hold.

In Oklahoma, Miss Black, my first teacher,
taught us from our packets with cards
of great paintings. Blue Boy and Pinky...
too fine for me with their satins
and ribbons and sweet faces.
But the clean black and white tiles
of Dutch interiors, the luminous light
of Flemish painters took root
and grew in me. The light, the light...
even the shock of light within darkness
of *The Night Watch* in its own darkened hall.
The light in their works was *The Light*.
It scrubbed clean the despair of dark winter.
The English chase off the demons
of damp darkness with wit,
but the Dutch cheered up the days
by painting the short paradise of summer.
They painted and framed it to be hung
on walls... and even slipped it
into the heart of a faraway child.

NANCY BROCK

One Summer

One summer, when I was thirteen, I got kicked out of the public library. Actually, Mama and I were invited to leave, which was the same as being kicked out.

In 1960, my small Alabama town didn't have a public swimming pool or a movie theater. Reading offered the only relief from seasonal boredom, but the contents of the public library were strictly regulated by Miss Gladys and her opinion of age-appropriate books. Miss Gladys kept directing me to the children's section, even though I'd long outgrown the books on those shelves. When Mama argued a mother's opinion outweighed the librarian's, Miss Gladys suggested we both leave.

In those days we walked to the library. We lived in the residential area tucked behind the one-street commercial area of town. Main Street consisted of four blocks of tired two-story brick buildings sagging in the heat. The public library was located in one of the Main Street buildings,

I scuffed the soles of my flip-flops against the sidewalk, empty hands thrust in the pockets of my shorts. "I wish the old biddy would drop dead."

"Don't wish such a thing," Mama said. "We can't really say anything more since Miss Gladys is Mayor Talley's sister. Think how bad you'd feel if Miss Gladys did suddenly die."

I didn't understand the connection between the public library and the mayor, and I doubted I'd feel bad if Miss Gladys dropped dead. "If I can't wish Miss Gladys dead, I wish the school library stayed open in summer."

White-painted houses shimmered in the sunshine, the beckoning porches fringed in green petticoats of azaleas. I glanced up as we passed Miss Lillian's house, even though she never sat on her porch during the hot months. Sometimes the white-haired lady peered from her window as we passed by, her head bent on her slender neck like a flower too heavy for its stem. The lace-pattern curtains slowly parted, and the pale face of a girl appeared in the window. She waved and I automatically waved back.

"Who are you waving at?" Mama hadn't seen the girl at the window.

"There was a girl in the window at Miss Lillian's." By now the curtain had dropped back to its usual place and the girl was gone.

"May Bell must have brought one of her daughters to work today. Must be nice to have help."

“No, Mama. This was a white girl.”

I was vindicated later when Miss Lillian telephoned. Mama explained to me and Daddy, “Miss Lillian has her niece visiting. She asked if Carolee could visit with Lil – that’s her niece’s name – one afternoon.”

Daddy looked up from his evening paper. “No harm could come from Carolee going to Miss Lillian’s house for an afternoon. She’s one of the bank’s best customers.” Daddy categorized people in our town by their relation to the bank.

“Don’t you think the child must be her grand-niece?” Mama said. “Miss Lillian’s as old as Noah’s ark; certainly she’s too old to have a niece Carolee’s age. I didn’t even know she still had family living, least not here in Alabama.”

“Seems I remember some one saying she was born back in the 1900’s, in New Orleans,” Daddy said before he disappeared back into the paper.

Mama wasn’t ready to let the subject of Miss Lillian rest, for she was one of those people who couldn’t talk in brief sentences. A trip to the grocery store for milk became an epic tale, relating when she realized she needed milk, and the names of any one she encountered on her two-block walk to and from the grocery store. She drew Daddy back into a conversation on the history of Miss Lillian. Daddy folded his paper, resigned to repeating all he knew about the old lady.

His first contact with Miss Lillian was a few months ago, through her lawyer. Miss Lillian, as the widow of an obscure relative of the late Mr. Benjamin Franklin Jones, inherited the house on the corner where she now lived. Citizens of our town suddenly became interested in the genealogy of the Jones family as they tried to remember how Miss Lillian may have been related by marriage to the recently departed Mr. Jones. Since Jones is as common a surname as Smith, no one satisfactorily connected Miss Lillian with a name or a face.

“She’s a fortunate woman,” Mama said. “She got the name, the house, and the money.”

I figured a birth date of 1900 would make Miss Lillian about sixty, as ancient as Babylon. The day she moved in, two big men took all day to unload her furniture from the van. Mama greeted our new neighbor with a chicken pot pie. Although Miss Lillian graciously accepted her offering, she didn’t invite Mama inside. The next day she returned the dish, hobbling over with the aid of a cane. After that day, our contact with the old lady was limited to an exchange of greetings if she sat on her porch when we walked past her house. Miss Lillian conducted most of her banking business with Daddy by telephone.

The afternoon of my visit with Miss Lillian's niece, Mama sent me over with a plate of brownies. I knocked on the door, expecting Miss Lillian to answer. Instead of a white-haired woman leaning on a cane, a girl around my age stood in the doorway. She was dressed like me, in shorts and tennis shoes.

"You must be Carolee. I'm Lil Dulac. Please come in." I grasped her outstretched hand and she gently pulled me inside.

I'd never been in Miss Lillian's house before. Feeble sunlight streamed through the curtained windows. Intricately patterned Oriental rugs muffled our steps as Lil led me to a room dominated by a large table. The house had the quiet stillness of an empty church sanctuary.

"Please sit. Do you play Chinese checkers?" The board game had already been set up. She eased the plate from my hands and set it on the snowy tablecloth. "Do you like milk? I'll get some from the ice box."

I'd never heard some one my own age use the term ice box to refer to a refrigerator.

While she was gone I looked around the room. A large glass-front cabinet held gilt-rimmed plates, cups and saucers. A smaller chest of drawers stood against the wall behind me.

I expected Miss Lillian to be with Lil when she returned, but she was alone. "My aunt is taking a nap. We won't disturb her." She placed a glass bottle of milk on the table next to the plate of brownies. To my astonishment she opened the glass door of the cabinet and took out two plates, two cups, and two saucers. "My aunt won't mind." Next she walked behind me, opened the top drawer of the chest, and took out two cloth napkins.

Mama only used her good china for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and special occasions. My hand trembled when I picked up the cup. I was terrified I might break something.

I won the first game of Chinese checkers; Lil won the second. In between moves she plied me with questions. What did I study at school last year? Did I have a boyfriend? The heat rose to my cheeks as I thought of Jimmy Crocker, who wasn't really a boyfriend. My heart broke every time he passed me in the school halls with noticing me. What did I do during the summer when I wasn't in school? She laughed when I told her about Miss Gladys and the public library, and informed me smugly she read anything she wanted. She sure asked a lot of questions. She had to, for her parents sent her to a private school in her hometown of New Orleans, and she had no concept of the kind of life I knew.

"It's almost like, I don't know," she paused, searching for the right words.

“Like living in the past, in another time?” I remembered Jimmy Crocker told me when his family moved here from Atlanta he felt like he’d moved back in time.

Lil laughed “Yes! I feel exactly the same way.” She leaned toward me, her face flushed. “I’m glad you’re here.” She asked in a hushed voice, “Would you like to know a secret?”

When I nodded, she jumped up and motioned for me to follow. We passed closed doors as we walked down a hallway. I expected one of those doors to open and Miss Lillian to emerge.

Lil eased open a door, and we entered the room. As my eyes grew accustomed to the dim light, I saw a four-poster bed, a tall chest of drawers reaching almost to the ceiling, and an armoire. Lil opened the doors of the armoire, and ruffled her hand through the sheen of bright fabrics hanging inside. “These are Aunt Lillian’s party clothes from long ago. Maybe one day we can play dress up.” She let the fabric drop from her hand and carefully closed the doors. “Look.”

For the first time I noticed the full-length mirror, with a heavy gilt frame of twisting vine pattern wrapped around the glass.

“When we dress up, we can see how we look.” She took my hand and gently pulled me to her side. “I have an idea. Let’s close our eyes and make a wish. You mustn’t tell me your wish. If you tell any one, it won’t come true.”

I closed my eyes. I wanted friends, not books. During the school year I self-consciously slouched down the halls, clutching books to my chest. My years sat heavily on my shoulders that summer, when I tended to blow minor irritations into major crises. I overheard Mama confide to Daddy that perhaps I should stay locked in my room until I’d reached an age and disposition where I could be unleashed upon the world.

Not that we had a wide world for the unleashing. The town had begun to change in small ways. The U.S. Postal Service bought the old Nesbitt place from the heirs after Mrs. Nesbitt passed away. Almost overnight the stately Victorian structure with the green lawn and spreading pecan tree disappeared, replaced by a rectangular steel and glass building surrounded by a paved parking lot. I had watched over the past few years as first one, and then another of the stately old residences with tree-shaded lots became transformed into the Seven-Eleven, Jacobs’ Auto Care, and the Dairy Queen.

“Hey, Carolee!” Lil squeezed my hand. “You can open your eyes now.”

Lil’s presence wasn’t a wish come true; she was an answer to a prayer. The one summer I badly needed a friend, when the days of isolation passed as slowly as peach preserves dripping off a spoon, Lil appeared.

She grinned. "Tomorrow you can show me downtown."

A new drugstore had replaced the old Woolworth's Five-and-Dime. Lil pulled me inside one afternoon. She had money from her aunt and apparently no advice on saving a single penny.

First we stopped at the magazine rack. Lil pulled *Teen*, a *Photoplay*, and *True Confessions* off the rack. Next she maneuvered me over to the makeup counter. I watched in admiration as she selected mascara, eye shadow, and lipstick.

We spent most of our time together in my room; when Mama was out we had the house to ourselves. Lil liked coming to my house because I had a radio we turned on full blast. We pored over fashion magazines, and made up our faces like the teen models. If we felt especially daring, we'd brush thick layers of shadow on our eyes in imitation of Elizabeth Taylor. We painted our toenails with Pink Lemonade nail polish. She showed me how to dab a cotton ball in milk, brush the cotton over my face, and let the milk dry. After fifteen minutes we'd wash our faces and swear our skin looked clear and glowing.

I never persuaded Lil to sun bathe. She considered the current trend of sprawling out in the back yard on a beach towel, basting bare skin with a mixture of iodine and baby oil, the height of stupidity.

"All that sun is bad for your skin," she argued. "You get early wrinkles from getting cooked like a turkey. Look how smooth my Aunt Lillian's skin appears."

I agreed she had a point. Miss Lillian not only avoided the sun, she appeared to be spending her entire summer napping in her room.

One afternoon I asked, "What do you want to be when you're old?"

Lil's pupils constricted to dark pinpoints. "I don't want to ever be old." She forced her words through tightened lips.

"We both are going to be old one day. What I meant was, what do you want to be one day? I want to be a librarian like Mrs. Clarke at school."

Lil's tight lips relaxed. "Oh, you mean work. I don't know if I'll have to work. I'm supposed to get my aunt's money one day, since I'm her namesake. I want to travel to France and Rome and all the exotic places I've read about. Aunt Lillian has told me stories about her glamorous life in Paris during the 1920's. I want to be one of those women."

I didn't know how to respond to her comment. I picked up one of the magazines we'd been perusing. "Let's pretend we can have any of the clothes in this magazine. What would you choose?"

Lil hooted with laughter at one of the new looks for fall fashion, a blazer worn with a pleated plaid skirt. "This looks exactly like my school

uniform.” For a girl taught by nuns at a private school, Lil seemed more knowing about the ways of the world. She shed light on the lurid passages when I got lost in the True Confessions stories. From Lil I learned about French kissing, what Men Really Did with Women, and a few other things useful to know.

She lifted her eyes from her magazine. “Women do some of these things with each other.”

She made me uncomfortable because I didn’t know whether to believe her.

Lil never stayed overnight, even though I asked and Mama offered to call Miss Lillian. “I have to spend some time with my aunt. I am supposed to be visiting her.” Privately she told me Miss Lillian regaled her with the most wonderful stories over supper. “Did you know?” she confided in a hushed whisper, her eyes glowing, “Aunt Lillian was right there at the same party when Zelda met F. Scott Fitzgerald.”

“She knew Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald?” I lowered my voice, even though no one was around to overhear us.

“Not well.” She had a faraway look in her eyes, and when she spoke, her voice took on the cadences of her aunt’s voice, slow as a muddy river winding its way to the delta. “Aunt Lillian was visiting relatives in Montgomery the summer Scott Fitzgerald met Zelda at the country club dance. He danced with Aunt Lillian before he ever took the first dance with Zelda Sayre. He was the most handsome man there; every girl was mad to take a turn around the floor with him. Aunt Lillian’s heart throbbed with excitement when he walked over to her. He took her hand in his, looked into her eyes, and led her out onto the floor. Even though his hand on her back was warm through the filmy stuff of her dress, she felt cold shivers down her spine. She sensed something doomed lurking behind the smile in his eyes. After the one waltz, Aunt Lillian excused herself, telling him she’d promised another the next dance. She never regretted her decision, especially after she learned he’d driven Zelda mad.”

“Wow! You talk like you were there.”

Lil nodded her head. “Aunt Lillian puts you right in the story with her. See why I like spending time with her?”

I knew the summer wouldn’t last, yet it was still a shock when Lil announced she’d be going home at the end of the week. “Why don’t you come over to my aunt’s tomorrow afternoon?”

Lil answered the door wearing a sleeveless dress of shimmery green material, with a hemline at least two inches above her knees. She’d outlined her eyes with black liner. “You look like you don’t recognize me. Come on in. Remember, I told you one day we’d play dress-up.”

I followed her down the hallway, noticing the way the green fabric swirled around her hips as she walked. “Where’s your aunt?”

“She’s taking a nap. She won’t mind; this was her idea.”

The room looked as I remembered it. Lil pulled a dress of gauzy pink material from the open armoire. “I think this will fit you just beautifully. And here.” She handed me a tall, crystal glass. “The occasion calls for champagne.” She peeled the foil away from the neck of a bottle, unreleased the wire cage with a few twists, and gently eased the cork from the neck. She filled my glass with a golden liquid.

I watched sparkling bubbles swirl upward, popping as each reached the surface. I took a tiny sip. When I swallowed, the champagne tickled as it slid down my throat. I tilted my head and drained the glass.

I wasn’t the least self-conscious as Lil helped me out of my shorts and shirt and eased the dress over my head. The gauzy pink material of the dress caressed my breasts and rippled around my hips as Lil pulled me in front of the mirror. “Look at yourself. You’re beautiful.” The sullen, gawky girl had disappeared.

“Let’s dance.” Lil folded me in her arms. “Pretend you’re with Scott Fitzgerald. He’s walked past every girl at the party to be with you.”

At first I stumbled through the steps, gaining confidence as Lil twirled me around the room, her left hand grasping my hand, her right hand pressed into the small of my back. Her hot breath grazed my cheek and her lips pressed against mine. When I responded, she sought my mouth more assertively, parting my lips with the tip of her tongue. I opened to her and gave back tongue thrust for thrust. We paused, admiring our reflections in the mirror as we sipped more champagne.

“Carolee, remember how we held hands and made a wish in front of this mirror the first time you were here? Did your wish come true? We can wish again, if you like.” She pulled me in front of the mirror.

As I gazed at my reflection, I knew what I wanted. Lil grasped my hand, smiled, and turned to face me. We closed our eyes and she squeezed my hand.

I don’t remember changing back to my own clothes or walking home. By the time I reached the door, the bubbly feeling started to disappear, replaced by waves of nausea. I managed to reach the bathroom in time.

Mama heard me retching. “Carolee, are you all right?” She came to the bathroom door, guided me to my bed, and placed a waste basket nearby. She left me alone until Daddy came home. I opened my eyes to see both of them hovering beside me. When Daddy told me they’d decided to call Dr. Hardy, I confessed to the unsupervised afternoon of debauchery. To my surprise, they burst into laughter.

“Carolee, the idea of drinking champagne is to savor it slowly, one glass at a time. Drinking the whole bottle only makes you drunk,” Daddy said. “There’s certainly more to Miss Lillian than meets the eye. Who would have thought the old lady’s been sipping champagne on the sly?”

The next morning I felt mercifully better. Mama suggested I call Lil. Miss Lillian answered the phone. “Child, I am so sorry. Lil left this morning. I thought she told you she’d be leaving.”

Mama saw the disappointment on my face. She hugged me as I cried and told her I’d lost my best friend. She assured me I’d make a new best friend when the school year began.

By the first day of school, thanks to a new haircut and new clothes, I had all the outer trappings of confidence and none of the inner strength. I’d rather have been thrown into a den of hungry lions than walk through the front door of the school building.

“Carolee, you look great. You’ve grown up over the summer.” Jimmy Crocker fell into step with me. I hadn’t forgotten how cute he looked, with his lop-sided smile and dark hair. That’s all it took, one walk down the hall with the most popular boy in the school. After I was seen with Jimmy Crocker, every one wanted to be my friend.

I told Miss Lillian I’d like to write Lil. Miss Lillian sat in the rocking chair on her front porch. She wore pants instead of her usual long skirt and sandals instead of clunky shoes. Her toenails were painted the same pink shade I’d worn all summer.

She stiffened. “You have me at a disadvantage. Her parents put her in boarding school this year, and I forgot to ask for an address. The next time I talk to my brother I’ll get an address for St. Anne’s.” She relaxed. “I’ll pass it on to you.” She never remembered to ask for the address. After reminding her three times, I gave up.

I remember high school as a relatively happy time. I had friends, I made the cheerleading squad, and I had Jimmy. He and I had our secret place by the river, where we went on our date nights after Jimmy got his driver’s license. We sat in Jimmy’s car, engaged in fierce makeout sessions. I acted as if his kisses drove me wild while I struggled to keep his hands away from the forbidden zones. I never found Jimmy’s kisses as stimulating as those I remembered sharing one summer with Lil in front of the wishing mirror. I don’t know why, but when he kissed me, I closed my eyes and thought of Lil.

ALANI HICKS-BARTLETT

Confession

It started with the aiding end:
A confession, the incensed vastness,
The incensed eyes. She said the darkness
Pulsed with her attendant heart,
In free fall, without shutters,
Without blinds, without netting.
Then calm again.

Then, there was the list of detractions: the imperfections,
Admitted accountability for the fallen man's form.
Next, there was the long loneliness,
The hole in the side that left in its wake
The painful sear of things still left to want
But gnawed away by time.
There was the sloping oval of her one good eye,
Set firmly in its shuttered fringe;
A bauble that would not be stolen,
That would not be hoarded in the moon's iron nest,
To feed the legions of stiff children buried in sand
Like some kind of talisman. This time.

After the acceptance of faults,
There were the many forms of contrition:
The winnowing-fan and the suckling of goats;
The cornucopia of woods and marble.
The flash of fleshy lips from the dark mossy depths
Led to the careful harvesting of the deeply toothed capeweed
And the psychotic nightshade. An offering.

Drink, drink.
Then came the spinning of vestments,
The careful pleating of the cassock, the theoretical cleansing.
Last, was the dark belly and the erect fir trees,
Challenging the lone moon's obscure authorial position.

The needle made its long peregrination
And pierced the proof of her nourishment:
The pounds of flesh clipped from the pleasing parts of the body,
The sum of the skeleton and all of its hinges and parts,
Now caving from their residual failure,
Now clattering from their loss of bearings.
— And then a laugh, or a song,
Or some deep prayer in the distance.
Or somewhere, in the darkness,
The dark, low clamor of a drum.

Guided by a dank mystical entelechy,
Reeking of bronze and myrrh,
The viscous candles oozed the precious grease
Of all the flickering lies of the deceitful kingdom,
Setting fire to the small brocaded bag of gilded teeth,
Setting fire to the small and blazing city.

If this is your land, you're on fire.
If this is your debt, you've repaid it.
Confiteor, Confiteor,
Ich, Ich, Ich.

ROBERT W. HILL

Cwms and Swales, Dingles and Stars

As I've grown more asymmetrically deaf—
forgive me, actual musicians!— When you
think you know the words, and one shows up
with no vowels, such as *cwms*, the music
of Jeff Buckley or Nina Simone, oh my God!
makes perfect sense.

When the sinkhole
in my yard began to relinquish building
trash piled hastily there forty years ago,
I imagined I could shovel, scrape a path
for watery runoff out of the front yard,
lay by hand—my own arthritic digits
—a hundred feet of gray-white stone,
ditchlike but lovely, like creek-fall toward
the public park beyond my fence. Then
one day, I thought the word *swale*, fell in
love with the idea, and ended doing nothing
more.

I drift from dirt into music, knowing
myself an interloper (ask my Brother Diamond).
One might call me *dilettante*, I simply can't
deny in my late years, when being almost
anything is preferable to being nothing. But
cwm is such a perfect thing, brief and vowelless,
unless you count the double-U as U, which my
sarcastic kids would call plain goofy.

Over
and over, sources say a geologic cwm is like
an amphitheatre, thus a place for mime, bursts
of sound and broad gestures of emotion (those
in the farthest rows must be able to empathize,
be fearful or in love).

What's there—or we have
put there—flows without moving, or moving

glacially, unlike our instant panting lives, what we may dig or see or wish to see. Unless there are words that shift as we imagine and then breathe in hope aloud, like *cwms* and *swales*, *dingles*, and *stars*. Always our lives, the *stars*!

LOWELL JAEGER

Dinosaurs

My son and I step, stop, stand still
on the steep sides of a badlands ravine.
we stare at the scrabble, scanning for shards
of fossilized bone, searching for telltale
shades of dusty rust-orange hidden
in ancient grey ocean bottom rubble and scree.

We stare. And stare longer. He stoops
to gather another chunk of rib or chip of jaw,
and he can name the particular something-a-saurus
who—eons before us—foraged here
on tropical beaches now gone bone dry.

He's hefting a canvas pack of treasure, his eyes
like raptors' eyes, honed to a razor focus.
I claim only a handful of what I suspect
could be worth holding onto, knowing I'm half-blind
in my ignorance and lack of practice.

My son, too, says he can cross the same ground
on succeeding days and marvel at all he'd passed over—
histories buried, millions of years lost, now risen
transformed, invisible as we are to window seat passengers
jetting across the cloudless high blue. We don't exist

as far as they can see: a man and his son inching
up a difficult slope, obscured in a jumbled landscape.
While a parched wind murmurs through prairie grass.
While a meadowlark, hidden from view, trills and whistles.
Even the gods may never find us.
On the horizon, mountains continue lifting skyward.

THERIN JOHNS

Natural Killer

The landscape I try to protect is struck by
lightning over 20,000 times in a single year
pop pop when summer rolls around I often find
my moonlit tower illuminated with bursts of day
like a trick policeman shining his flashlight
through my window now I'm two teenagers
parked in Blue Rock Springs Park and it's 1969
Hi, hi, hi there hot fun in the summertime,
this lovers lane Mikey wearing extra sweaters
to hide his thin frame from the girl next
seat over, her skirt a slow dance across thighs
pop pop the Zodiac's gun explodes as pitch night
air lights up the sky again and again my blood
races each time it strikes near my tower
like 20,000 California homes staying lit
all hours when newspapers let them know,
This is the Zodiac speaking.

SHARON KENNEDY-NOLLE

Civilian Conservation Corps

Surely something would stay intact,

brown painted pine shacks,
some bunks,
or faded signage

splintering into
skunk cabbage curls.

Instead, finished foundations,
concrete and kudzu
fill moss hollows, entwine the water pump.

A rusty hoop stopped on some forgotten dime
dropped on an outhouse stoop;

suddenly, there's a hammering,

deliberate labor, not in woodpecker measure.

An iron twin-bed frame girdles a great birch,
whose roots bear ever-deeper rusted cuts.

A Greenwich wall,
the Corps' careful stone and mortar work,

gone to pieces.

That hammering again,
iron triangle tinkling.

You, Father, now nineteen years
in your grave

asthmatic, scrawny boy,
too frail for outdoor life,

the long train ride to Oregon
only to find at the end of the line

endless logging and trail blazing.

The wages sent home
to parent tyrants;

nothing in your pocket,
except the train ticket back

to a boarded-up life,
more dead doornail.

The Great Works
conclude in vast crumble.

What is that hammering?

LEE LANDAU

Foreign Vocabulary

tribute to Muriel Rukeyser

She slurs words
an incomprehensible,
foreign vocabulary--

s's, w's, z's
gargle in her throat.

Tongue flattened against spacing
of her front teeth whistling

in the wind as a snake rattles
its way towards freedom,
tall grass bending sideways.

Silence, silencio! Dice el gato.
More than threats
to hoarse, vocal chords.

Only words in a foreign
tongue are audible now.

Gators are parked
around territory marked
as home front to her cottage.

Oui, oui, wags the dog
to her snores & dreams
interspersed with the z's of sleep.

Tenga cuidado!
Dice el pero—take care.
Danger in the yard,

Now robed in foreign words,
locked door, windows
perched slightly open,

She withdraws from the reality
of danger, snatches this nap, lays adrift
on a sweat soaked mattress--

Mostly unaware of how silence
might threaten her

With no vocabulary
to dance around danger.

*pero=dog

*gato=cat

PAMELA S. CARTER

Season's End

I sit in the silent house as the light fades from the day, waiting for my husband to return for the last time. I watch for an ambulance to bring Paul home from the hospital, where he's been pumped full of fluids and antibiotics to treat a wicked case of pneumonia. When the oncologist says my husband has a week, maybe two, left, Paul refuses further treatment; he wants to die at home in his own bed, he says.

I spend the afternoon admitting him to the Denver Hospice, who will provide services at home for him. I signed a sheaf of papers in his hospital room to insure his wishes will be followed. I break down briefly when I sign a document agreeing to make no attempt at resuscitation once his heart stops. Signing it makes real a moment that so far I'm unwilling to face. Later I meet the home hospice nurse at our house to go over the contents of the "comfort kit" and instructions for Paul's care. When the nurse pulls the bottle of morphine from the kit, it looks small to me.

"Paul is a recovering heroin addict who's been clean for twenty-five years," I say. "And for every minute of those twenty-five years, he's been in pain. I'd like him to be as pain-free as possible for whatever time he has left."

The nurse meets my eyes across the dining room table. "I'll be right back," she says and runs out to her car. She returns with a second bottle of morphine. "If you need more, just call me."

Paul's dog, Lulu, begins to whine, letting me know that Paul is on his way home. Lulu has a sense we humans don't possess and it's uncannily accurate. The hospital is nearby so Paul will be here soon. I sit in the dark; the day is gone.

The ambulance attendants lift Paul from the gurney and place him on his bed. He's wrapped in a sheet that looks like a shroud, but he's too tired to throw it off and climb under the covers. He doesn't even open his eyes, exhausted by a day of making decisions about his death. I transfer from my wheelchair to the edge of his bed to be close to him.

"Would it be better if I slept with you?"

"Much better," he says; his voice is so weak it doesn't sound like him. His desire to have me sleep with him is unlike him too. We normally sleep in separate rooms. I strip down to a tee shirt and underpants and slide under the covers. I think I will lie awake all night, but I close my eyes and

sleep straight through. Paul's alarm wakes me. It's a special alarm designed not to startle him and trigger his PTSD. On the rare nights I sleep in here, he turns it off before I hear it, but this morning it wakes me. I turn it off and watch him sleep for a while. Without his dentures his face sinks in on itself, and his eyes are sunken and dark. *I see the end in his face.* The thought brings me to the brink of tears, and I feel a flutter in my chest that may be panic.

Paul insists on getting up and dressing himself. I'm not sure he's up to the task, but he waves his hand dismissively and banishes me from his room. He allows Annie, our home health aide of many years, to help him pull his jeans up. When he's ready, he emerges fully dressed, as he always does. It could be any morning in the last five years; only it's not. He rolls to his customary place at the head of the table, but he refuses his usual coffee, and his lungs hurt too much to smoke, so his hands are unusually still. I stroke his forearm as if I can keep him here with my touch. He makes a weak attempt at humor.

"What a way for an old junkie to go," he says. "I can have all the morphine I want." He pulls his face into his charming, self-effacing grin that gives me hope. But he soon begins to drift away, and after an hour or so, he tires and returns to bed for the last time. I don't know why he needed to get up and sit with me that morning. One day, though, I will believe it was his way of reassuring me that life will go on after he's gone.

I sit by his bed in my wheelchair throughout the day, giving him hourly doses of morphine, just enough to keep his pain at bay. I soak small, pink sponges on sticks in water and place them in his mouth to suck. A catheter, inserted in his urethra at the hospital, is attached to a large, plastic bag to measure his urine output, which will diminish as he approaches death. I keep track of that too. But mostly I sit and hold his heavy workman's hand in mine. There's no grace in his hands with their thick fingers and nails cut almost to the quick, but they are competent and sure, whether he's making tender, passionate love or lifting me from the floor after a fall that fractures my left femur. They seem to have a life of their own; they're what attracted me to him in the first place almost twenty years ago. I cannot believe he will never take up his drills or sanders again. They sit on their chargers in a neat line in his workshop as if waiting for his return.

Suddenly I remember a moment in 2008. Paul had just returned from walking Lulu on a cold winter morning and left his gloves folded on the hall table. *I won't be able to bear looking at his gloves like that when he's gone.* I don't know where the thought came from, but I remember it now with the same kind of breathless pain.

He spends his last Wednesday dozing, but occasionally he opens his eyes and catches sight of me sitting by the bed. Whenever he sees me, his face lights up with love as it always does, no matter how short a time we're apart. I wonder where he goes when he dozes. His eyes, usually an intense blue, seem as washed out as a pair of old jeans. He fades before my eyes, but I don't recognize the signs.

I don't sleep with him that night but remain by his bed, giving him morphine and swabbing his mouth with the sponges. Sometimes he sucks on a sponge, but most of the time he's content to let me swab his lips and the inside of his mouth. Later I will wish I had crawled into bed beside him to hold him through the night; not for his comfort but for mine.

Thursday passes much like Wednesday, though he opens his eyes less often. The morphine doses and swabbing become a pattern. The repetition lulls me into thinking he will go on forever like this. *I can do this for eternity and it won't be Hell; Limbo, maybe, but not Hell.* Still, for his sake, I can't wish for that. He is a man who loves life—and this isn't life.

Julie, our housemate and Paul's best friend for the past twenty years, returns home from work in the early evening. I sit with her as she eats her dinner. She asks for some time alone with Paul to say good-bye, but her words don't sink in. I just nod my head and light a welcomed cigarette. I won't smoke near Paul and I miss the nicotine. I long for the anesthesia of a glass of Scotch, its smoky heat sliding down my throat, warming my insides and numbing my pain. But I chain-smoke instead while Julie sits with Paul. *Why is she saying good-bye now?* Only two days ago the oncologist said Paul had a week, maybe two.

In the long darkness between nightfall on Thursday and dawn on Friday, Paul begins to cry, the corners of his mouth jerked down hard like a child's, and tears run down the sides of his face. A high, keening cry issues from his throat. I get some morphine for him, though I know his pain isn't physical. I don't know how to comfort this intense sorrow, and I let him cry himself out.

"I can't take you with me," he says. "You're not ready and you can't ride on my coattails."

"I know," I say, a little stung by his implied criticism of my spiritual readiness. "I'll be okay." It's a lie but I try to put a brave face on my impending loss; I'm too proud not to. "I have the book to write and the garden to plant."

"Don't come looking for me. I'll find you," he says, and all I can think is *Jesus, he can't commit even in death.* But two years after his death, I will realize that's not what he means at all. I will understand that he doesn't want to abandon me and he has no choice. In the face of death's inevitability,

of course he weeps and cautions me against giving in to my own pain by attempting to follow him.

That night he asks me to open a window a crack to allow his spirit egress when the time comes. I do as he asks, but the cold darkness of the November night seeps in through that small opening and permeates the room. Soon I am chilled to my core.

Paul speaks his last words to me: "I think my sole purpose in this life was to introduce you to the basic concept of a Spiritual Master, and I'm not sure I've succeeded." I wasn't sure either, not then. But two years after his death, I will come to see how much he taught me, not with his words, but by the way he lived his life.

* * *

The room is freezing but Paul's face is flushed with fever. His lungs begin to fill with fluid, and I am forced to face the unthinkable; there is no escaping it. By 2 a.m. I think every wet, ragged breath will be his last, but he clings to life like a limpet clings to its rock.

I call the hospice nurse on duty that night to let her know what's happening. "I don't care if it's the pneumonia or the cancer that takes him," I say. "I just don't want him to go kicking and screaming. I want his passing to be as peaceful and pain-free as possible."

There's a brief silence on the other end of the line, so brief I think I might be imagining it. Then she recommends increasing Paul's morphine with his next dose; she doesn't say by how much. She tells me to squeeze two drops of atropine on his tongue to ease his breathing. I fill an eyedropper full with morphine instead of stopping at the mark on the plastic. It's not an overdose, I think, but it might relax him enough to let go without worrying about what will happen to me when he does.

I transfer to the side of his bed to administer the morphine and place two drops of atropine on his tongue. I clasp his warm hand in mine. I shiver and my teeth chatter spasmodically with cold.

"Paul, do you want me to stay? Squeeze my hand once for 'yes' and twice for 'no.'"

His hand remains still but I believe he hears me. He's forced me to make the choice to go or stay. *Damn his eyes! How dare he test my love with one of his mixed messages now of all times?* Something in me snaps and I flee in what feels like anger to my own warm room. It will take two years for me to realize I can't bear to watch him die, to see the light fade from his eyes. And one day I realize he knew that, and that's why he wouldn't answer my question. God, I can be dense.

“I think Paul is dead.” Julie’s voice cuts across some dream and rouses me from a troubled sleep. I swing my legs over the side of the bed and transfer to my wheelchair.

Julie starts to follow me into Paul’s room, but I ask her to give me a few minutes alone with him. The silence in the hallway confirms that Paul is gone. When I enter his room, he lies utterly still, his eyes closed. The flush of fever on his high cheekbones is gone, leaving his skin devoid of color. I touch his cold face, and suddenly I am naked in the dark; it’s an infinite void with no possibility of light. *Have I fallen into the black hole that is my heart?* Whatever, wherever it is, the image falls out of time and memory for a year and a half until a skilled therapist helps me dredge up that moment in the predawn hours of November 7, 2014. Until then it’s as if it never happens.

Paul looks peaceful in death, but there is evidence of a struggle. The sheet falls back from his body as if he tried to sit up in his struggle to draw breath at the end, and a pink trickle of blood diluted with fluid is caught in the silver stubble of his beard at one corner of his mouth. *Should I have stayed and held him as he drowned in the fluid in his lungs?* It’s the first time I ask myself that question; it won’t be the last. I soak a washcloth in warm water and wash the blood from his face. I want to remove the hated catheter, but I’m afraid of hurting him. It doesn’t occur to me that he is beyond pain now. Last, I slip his wedding band off his left hand and slide it onto my right index finger as a kind of talisman to keep him close.

It’s over, done. Only it’s not over, not by a long shot. It’s the beginning of a long journey of grief and healing, but I won’t know that until two years after what I mistake for the end. And I’m not done yet. Grief is like an old, slow-moving river, full of oxbows and pools of unexpected depths. It won’t be rushed or pushed, and I am destined to walk beside it through all the seasons of my life.

RICHARD LEBOVITZ

The Lost Family of Belz

Wolves dressed as men descended upon
great-grandmother's Bessarabian home
and devoured those who'd stayed behind.
When she returned, the house was empty
of every joy that had flourished there.

As if her tears could fill the void,
she wept and wept, so long and hard
she went blind, grandma said,
and then, bereft of everything, she died.
"A mad dog bit her," grandma would say.

This was in the city of Belz, of which poet
Jacob Fichman once wrote, "Of all the places
I visited and wandered through, the grass
seemed not as bright as in the meadows
on the banks of the Raut, specks of gold
above the clear water."

Belz, where the chosen lay rotting
in the swamps and beneath the fields
and along the roads where they fell.

We remember this family we never knew
by the portrait that stood
on my aunt and uncle's bookshelf.
Mother, father, daughters—

they peer from the photo now browned
with age without knowing this fragile
piece of paper would one day stand
as the sole tribute to their existence.

JOHN LINSTROM

Ice Sheet Archive

I must have been underground
shifting tattered tissue-leaves
of letters farmers wrote all
of a hundred years ago, when off

from that peninsula's ancient hoar
broke a frigid Delaware
and more—the largest iceberg
we have known, the child of Larsen C.

The dust of a farmer's gullied land
calves no more softly than that crack
of artificial color tracked for months
across a grid by satellite, no more

softly: lettered peninsular shapes
at the edges of these pages part
with one gloved finger's brush.
“Let me remind you,” this farmer

now begins, in swooping trails of ink,
sharp pen scratch marking out
his losses but his assets too,
these trails a silent prophecy

that I will hear his voice, “the soil
will cry beyond our hearing or our reach
when it has gone”—the sheet limps back
over a hand the author could not intend—

the sound comes in with cold metallic smells,
oil blacks paths across the waters,
hat in hand, as wind lifts land, this terrible roar
of ink and ice, of sunlight bearing down.

IRIS LITT

Early Stages

Try to remember
that now is
the dream part

remember you learned
heaven is not enough

try to remember ahead
the sock on the floor
the listlessness, hostility
and other realities
of the heavenly
chosen one

but by then
your heart will be trapped
like a little forest animal

who still hopes
and eagerly endures the pain
as it gnaws off
its own leg.

DAVIS ENLOE

Big Man to Little Man

Ray was sitting in the Wednesday night deacons meeting when he heard Ezra talking to himself on the church steps. When Ezra dared God to come out and deal with him “big man to little man,” Ray bristled, raising his eyebrows at Preacher Bob.

“Soused again,” Bob said. “He’ll wander off soon.”

“You home, Hosanner?” Ezra called. “You ever home, world traveler. I got shoes, issues—my fingers, need my godd—goldarn fingers back. Ought to be easy, grave buster.”

Irritation blushed through Ray. He took a breath, but when pebbles pinged off the century-old bell, he slapped both hands on his knees and stood.

“Pray with me,” Bob said. Ray sat down. Bob prayed for missionaries in Peru, for Cove Creek Baptist’s shut-ins, for the church’s building fund. When he started praying for Ezra’s wife Rita and their children, Ezra staggered off, singing, “Jesus Loves the Little Chitlins.”

A few days later, at the Sunday evening service, Ezra slipped from his pew and headed for the altar. As he hurried down a side aisle, past the stained-glass window where John-the-Baptist’s head stared from a platter, Ray juggled the Broadman’s Hymnal in his hands. He wanted to sling it at the back of Ezra’s head, daze him a little. If he threw it now, he could clip him before he reached the last window—the one depicting Judas hanging from the Shame Tree.

“Brother Ez,” Preacher Bob called, “I surmise you’re Spirit-stricken, the Devil is scooting south on a skid.”

Like a lost sailor grasping for a rescue rope, Ezra scrambled for the pastor’s hand.

“Get on up here,” Bob said, pulling Ezra onto the pulpit.

“You’re looking at a broke man, people,” Ezra said, “shattered into a million pieces. I need help—help I don’t deserve.” Kneeling now, hands stretched heavenward like a man with a shotgun poking into his back, Ezra started to moan. “Wouldn’t blame you for changing locks on this sacred house, mailing me a map to Eternal Damnation.”

God, Ray wanted to drag Ezra out of the sanctuary by his donkey ears, bounce him down the front steps and out of the parking lot. Half the congregation would thank him outright, the other half nod approval.

Remember Rita and the children, Ray told himself. Why the hell does Rita stay with Ezra?

"I got no right," Ezra said, "to ask forgiveness for sins I keep repeating, but I'm asking." Ezra swayed on the pulpit's edge like a man at a precipice. "I can't get up by myself no more."

Ray conceded Ezra was convincing. But given this was one of several confessions Ezra had made over the years, Ray sided with the doubters who stood to leave. Then Bob launched into his post-sermon sermon on his life's "dark stretch."

Ray had often heard Bob preach on how he'd starred on Satan's team and was paid in promises now recognized as his own lies. "Am I right, Deacon Ray?" Bob asked. Ray nodded, recalling how after his NFL career he wandered for years in his own darkness.

A few minutes later, Ray stood with church-goers shuffling through the sanctuary's front doors pledging their support to Ezra, Rita, and their two children who stood at the doorway. Approaching from behind, Ray wrapped his arm around Ezra's shoulders, hurried him down the steps and guided him around a corner. "Just be a minute, Cousin Rita," he called back.

At forty-six, Ray was not the imposing defensive tackle he had been, but at six-five, 310, he got Ezra's attention. "No call grabbing me," Ezra said, twisting to get loose.

"Until the Lord seizes your soul," Ray said, "I'm obliged." In the dim parking lot light, hands latched onto Ezra's bony shoulders, Ray spun Ezra around. "E-Z, I see you're confused. For months, you've toyed with the Lord like he's your yo-yo, coming in his house when guilt tears at you like firethorn." Ezra squirmed, but Ray's grip tightened. "Forgiveness is part of it, but it's time for co-mitment."

"Let go. I aim to do right."

"Damn right you are. Your ass misses Sunday service, morning or night, you miss Wednesday evening, I whiff moonshine, or you do Rita wrong, I'm going to kick your ass to Kingman's Dome. Now there's the pointed truth straight as I can aim it."

"You talking Hosanna's truth, or Ray Snipes' truth?"

Unsure of Ezra's meaning, Ray hesitated. Was Ezra blathering, or did he know something? Ray'd never told anyone what he'd seen decades earlier when Hank Hughes, Ezra's father, had shown up at the barnyard at Ray's house. He'd kept his secret locked away. And three years earlier, Ray's father Jake had dragged his truth into a cheap casket and slammed the lid behind him. Ezra didn't know shit from asparagus.

"Heed me," Ray said.

"I know I'm a failure," Ezra said, looking up at Ray's shadowed face, "but you make trying to do better feel like a bad thing." Ezra struggled, but Ray's hands were clamped onto his shoulders like industrial c-clamps.

"E-Z, if the Lord can't turn you, I will introduce your head to a Charlotte phone book."

Ezra jerked hard twice, but Ray squeezed for a few more seconds, thumbs digging into the smaller man's joints. Released, Ezra scurried off, but called back, "That ain't Christian."

A few days later, Rita called. "Don't know what's got into Ezra," she said. "He's tossing moonshine bottles like he was turning up sweet potatoes—even tossed the Nyquil."

Great," Ray said. "Listen, we need help tending church grounds. At ten, Hudson's old enough. It's a paying job."

"No need paying him for doing good."

"How's Maggie? Almost three, isn't she?"

"Three last week. You'd think Hud had a leash on that girl, way she tags after him."

"Bet she's smart like her momma."

"Ray, thank you."

"For what?" Though Ray'd never understood Ezra's appeal to Rita, he refused to judge her. Maybe it was partly his fault she'd ended up with Ezra. Wasn't like someone forced him to leave Rutherford County to play football at Wake.

"For reaching out to Hud," Rita said. "Not as a deacon, but as a man. He's a good boy and with Ezra's past, working extra shifts . . . Just, thank you."

"No need to ever thank me, Rita. God bless you both."

Later, when Hud rode up on his bicycle, Ray was watering day lilies. Tall like his mother, Hud sat astraddle his hand-me-down Murray.

"Hi, Hudson. What you up to?"

"Just came from Gramps. He wanted me to ask if you remember that Raleigh game where you shoe-stringed that running back on the goal line?"

"Lord, your granddad's memory—that's been nearly 30 years."

The game, after Ray earned MVP honors, had not only drawn a crowd of college scouts, but had brought gifts from town folks who otherwise would've never noticed a Snipes—certainly not Jake Snipes' boy.

"Let's cross the hardtop for a look-around at the grass. Before you leave, we'll free up your rusty chain."

"You mind calling me Hud, now I'm older?"

Later, at his shop, Ray rolled Hud's bike inside where he stored the Harley owned since college. He, Preacher Bob, and Sheriff James Mack often rode the local roads along the Broad River traversing through Highway 64's foothills and running up to Lake Lure.

Hud studied the workout bench and weights in the shop. "How much can you lift?"

"Now I'm an old man, maybe 365?"

"Before you got old?"

"On a sunny day, four eighty."

"Four hundred and eighty pounds? I mean, I ain't saying you didn't, but that's much as two Aunt Betsys."

After Ray wire-brushed and lubed the bicycle chain, Hud raced off, looking back at the dust he'd kicked up. Ray felt a surge of regret for never marrying.

That evening, reading next week's Sunday School lesson, Ray watched the sun sink behind the Blue Ridge Mountains, rimming them in the day's last light. Somewhere far off, a hunting dog bayed and Ray was back to the morning his father Jake had found their dog Birdie poisoned. His father had returned from the Marines the week before and blamed the dog's death on Ezra's "draft-dodging" father, Hank Hughes. Had there ever been a time when those two hadn't feuded? Not that Ray could remember—not since, per Jake Snipes, Hank had years earlier cut pulp wood off disputed land. Ray missed Birdie, the only dog he'd ever owned. A few days after the hound died, a wind storm had downed a fence and Hank's prize bull strayed onto Snipes' land. Jake had jumped at the chance to even things, to use the Nambu pistol he'd taken off a dead Japanese.

Ray listened to the creek running through the woods below his house. He missed his mother, the smell of lavender at bedtime. Would his father have gone off to war had she not died? Probably, that's what men did. He missed his father, too—the kind one, not the abusive drunk that came home from Guadalcanal. And he missed playing football with jocks like himself. Life was like that damn creek—splash in it, scoop it up with your hands. But if you stood in it long enough, you would find the best years had rushed past long ago.

Before bed, Ray was putting away dishes when he noticed an ice pick on the kitchen counter. He picked it up, balanced it, then threw it into the back of a utensil drawer.

Over the next few weeks, Ray helped Hud improve his jump shot. He took him fishing on Brooks Lake in a wooden row boat, the leaky one Ray had made three decades ago in shop class. He taught him how to tie on

lures, bait hooks with crickets. In turn, Hud weeded Ray's garden, swept his shop, tended church grounds. To surprise Hud, Ray gathered a dozen football cards he'd kept from his playing days and helped Hud start his own collection.

Ezra attended church regularly, even went on a youth trip rafting down the Nantahala River, though he swallowed more water than he paddled. If work got in the way, he checked with Bob about missing church. Things continued like this for a few months, until Friday before Labor Day weekend.

Ray was closing his shop when Ezra pulled up in his rundown '64 Impala. Ray didn't trust him. He was foolish-crazy; a drunk. On his twenty-first birthday Ezra had taken a dare to lie down on the railroad track. At the last second, he'd rolled out of the way, but lost the fingers on his left hand.

"Come in the house," Ray said, trying not to sound annoyed. "Where it's cooler."

Inside, Ezra sat down, but scooted his chair back from Ray's desk. With his right hand, he turned his hat on one knee like a knob—a little left, a little right.

"Ezra, you been drinking?"

"Swear I ain't drunk." The hat rotated faster. "Rinsed with Scope 'fore I came over s'all."

"You given up drinking for good?"

"Off shine for good, real co-mitted—ask Rita."

"What's troubling you then?"

"Mill laid me off. Left me cross-haired. They ain't sure when I'll be called back, or if. Only work I can rustle is Uncle Coot's Hog Hollow still."

"That's easy liquor. Got to be other work."

Ezra shook his head. "I'm still paying down Rita's electric washer, and laying aside for her new fridge—defroster kind. I'll just be hauling—no actual still work. Chitlins need school clothes. Hud's birthday is just around a dogleg. Just hauling. I ain't angling."

Using his hat, Ezra shooed away a wasp.

"Kill that damn thing," Ray said.

"She's just looking for a safe spot."

"Look E-Z," Ray said. "You've got the doubters in your corner. The whole dang church is proud of you—especially Bob. Why invite the Devil through the hatch door?"

"Wouldn't ask if work wont scarce as a dinosaur's baby teeth. But, trust me Ray, trust me. I don't want to get acquainted with that book over there for missing a Sunday time to time." Ezra pointed at the three-inch thick phonebook on Ray's desk corner.

Don't make me," Ray said, rapping the phonebook with his knuckles, "step in on Rita's behalf."

When Ezra stood to leave, Ray told him to hold on. He looked at Ezra and started to speak. "Nothing. Let me kill that damn wasp."

"She just wants out," Ezra said, hurrying outside, the wasp escaping with him.

The next Sunday evening Rita sat alone with Hud and Maggie. Then a second Sunday. The third time Ezra missed, Ray decided it was time to visit Rita.

When Ray pulled up, Hud was shooting baskets through a hoop bolted to the barn and Maggie was shadowing him. As a child, Ray had spent many days around the same barn, locked in fierce corn-cob battles with cousins. The two spotted Ray and raced to his pickup, Hud letting Maggie win by half a step.

Maggie's brown hair was tied into pony tails sticking out on the sides. She wore a pair of white Nancy Sinatra boots. "Wanna wear my glasses?" she said, offering her plastic red-rimmed sunglasses.

Ray tried on the glasses, but let them fall off into his hands.

"Your head's too big," Maggie said, grabbing her glasses, then chasing a ground squirrel around the woodshed.

"Folks home?" Ray said.

"Just momma," Hud said. "Putting up tomatoes. Pop's at Hog Hollow."

"Got you something."

Through his truck window, Ray retrieved a thin rectangular package tied with string. "For your birthday, next week. I'll be off on a bike ride."

Sitting on the front steps, Hud untied the string. "If this is what I think it is," he said. He stared at the card, protected by a piece of cardboard. "No. I know you ain't giving this up."

"Namath signed it for me in '69, rookie card."

Hud stood and moved to hug Ray, but Ray waved him off.

"Go on and play," he said, "before I take it back."

As Hud ran back to the barn, Ray felt the weight of his lifetime around him. It was with him everywhere, all the time. He prayed for peace. It'd happened the way it happened. Couldn't be undone.

At his father's trial for shooting Hank Hughes' bull, Ray had sat in the back of the courtroom. "Snipes," the judge'd said, "Shooting a damn bull twice behind the ear ain't self-defense. Get your truck, the confounded title, turn them over to Hank Hughes."

Rita's voice floated through the screen. "No need to knock when you're always welcome."

The house Rita had inherited from her grandparents was stately once, with its wrap-around porch supported by numerous small columns. Now, most of its white paint has worn away, damaged shutters leaning against the house, roof patched here and there with tin. Many of the massive red oaks were close to 300 years old.

At the kitchen table where Ray had eaten as a child, Rita handed him a glass of milk and a slice of rhubarb pie.

"Thanks," Rita said, "for making Hud feel special."

"He is special, like his mother." Ray leaned back in his chair.

"Same table," she said. "Remember that possum trapped under it at Christmas?"

"Grown men cowered while Granny brained it with a poker," Ray said. "We probably ate it for breakfast."

Rita laughed. "Lord, I hope not. Want to see the house? Years since you've been here."

The front room was where uncles had warmed at a fire, bragging about their hunting dogs. In one bedroom, Ray had slept on a pallet with Theo, a cousin with a flair for horror stories. He'd died years ago in a logging accident. At his wake, Ray and Rita had sat together on the Duncan Phyfe in the parlor.

The next bedroom contained a quilting rack and a straight-back chair. The quilt was two-thirds finished. "Granny," Ray said, touching a patch of orange burst, "called this pattern Sunshine."

"You remember that? Ezra calls it his Starburst."

"His Starburst?" Ray said.

"We work together some," Rita said, "but Ezra does most at night. Calms his urge."

"I didn't know. Well, he's sure good at it."

They worked back to the kitchen, where they sat again at the table. Silence settled between them.

The week before he'd left for college, at a house rented in Spindale, Rita had cooked his favorite meal: meatloaf, mashed potatoes, creamed corn. She'd asked questions about college: where he would sleep, courses he would take, who would care for him if he was hurt.

A thunderstorm had rolled through, knocking off the power, so they'd sat on her porch until it'd stopped raining, then watched neighbor kids stomp through puddles. At dark, they'd gone inside. Rita lit candles, and then an oil lamp on a coffee table. Sitting across from each other on an oval rug, Ray knew that moment would never repeat itself.

Rita had slid the oil lamp closer to herself. “Remember when you were little,” she’d said, “cousins made fun of your size?”

“You sent their asses home crying,” he’d said, taking her hand. “I want to come back to see you.”

Pulling her hand free, Rita had said, “Someone waits for you at college, Ray. Reading at a library table, or laughing with friends under a maple. This is a chance to break from your history. Start fresh.”

Ray had begged, but she’d insisted she wasn’t his girl, that she would always love him, but could never be his girl. There was the age difference. They were cousins. It was the only time he’d ever felt angry with Rita. “I know why you’re doing this,” he’d said. “Some of it makes sense, but mostly it’s bullshit and you know it.” Ray’d fought back tears, but in the end, had asked her, “How do you want me to think of you?”

“I want to be,” she’d said, her hand following the contour of the lamp’s globe, “the glass that keep’s the wind away.”

That had been so long ago, yet only yesterday. Sure doesn’t take long to get old, Ray thought, then he broke the silence. “How’s Ezra?”

“He’s worried about the family, blames himself for everything,” Rita said. “I don’t like him around Coot.”

Rita carried Ray’s empty glass to the sink, rinsed it, filled it with water.

“Best well water in Ruv’ton County.”

“Always has been,” Ray said, taking the glass.

“With church help, we’re getting by,” Rita said. “Ezra just had it hard as a boy, like another man I know.”

Rita placed an open hand on Ray’s broad back, then rested her other hand on his chest. “When are you going to let one good woman in here?” she said.

“I already have,” Ray said, moving her hand away.

“I’m sorry,” Rita said. “That was too personal. I didn’t mean —.”

“No, it’s okay,” Ray said. “I should go.”

“Walk you out to your truck,” Rita said. “You need fresh eggs?”

Two days later, Ray stood on his Harley’s crank lever, then listened for the skip he’d heard before changing the spark plugs. Satisfied, he rode to the end of his drive. He planned to swing by Sheriff James Mack’s house. From there, they would ride around Lake Lure and spend three days on the Blue Ridge Parkway near Mount Mitchell. Much later, Ray would realize that at about the time he turned right toward the Broad River, Ezra was in the woods fumbling through the trunk of his old Chevy for a jack stand.

But Ezra had not yet stopped to change the flat. Instead, he was returning with Rita and the kids from Doby's Flea Market, over in Green Hill. "I gotta run by Coot's," he said. "Pick up some money."

"I don't like being around that man," Rita said.

"With what we made at Doby's, another thirty-eight dollars, we can get that fridge."

Rita shrugged.

After Ezra turned off 221, weaving up a bumpy dirt drive through thick woods, stopping outside Coot's junky mobile home tucked beneath a granite outcropping.

"I'll be quick as a light switch," Ezra said.

In the back seat, Maggie hummed a song to her paper dolls while Hud shuffled through a stack of ball cards. A few minutes later, counting money he folded and stuck into his shirt pocket, Ezra slid behind the steering wheel.

"You been drinking," Rita said, sounding annoyed, "while we sit."

"I ain't drunk nothing," Ezra said. "Coot passed out on the couch. He must've spilled some on me."

"Your drinking," Rita said, stomping the floorboard, "is sapping what little I have left of me."

"I swear, I ain't drunk nothing."

"Don't breathe that sin on me."

After the car bounced through ruts for half a mile, Ezra said, "Something's wrong." He stopped, jumped out, and seconds later stuck his head in the window. "Flat, front left." Then he rummaged through the trunk for the bumper jack.

Hud stirred, "We home?" he said.

"No sweetie, got a flat," Rita said. "Gonna be a while."

Hud leaned his head back against the door and closed his eyes.

"I'm thirsty," Maggie said.

With his feet hanging outside the car, Ezra scraped mud off his shoes with a stick. A few minutes later, he turned left onto 221, heading towards the Broad River from the opposite direction as Ray. When the car picked up speed, heavy clumps of red clay slung off the tires and thumped inside the wheel wells.

Ray rounded the curve before the river and started down the long steep slope to the bridge. He down-shifted his bike. It was then he spotted Ezra's rusty green Impala almost to the bridge. Ray braked his motorcycle.

Ezra's car started across the bridge, but halfway across it swerved left, then jerked back to the right. Time slowed. Then the car hurtled through

the bridge's low wooden railing. Ray twisted open his bike's throttle and raced down to the bridge where he hard-braked. By the time the Harley fell over on its side, Ray was diving through the gap left in the rail.

But the sedan had not landed flat. Instead, it rested nose first, its front submerged and its rear half angling out of the river. In the front seat, Rita, head in and out of water, struggled to open her door. Hud was down on the rear floor board. Looking for those ball cards, Ray thought. Maggie, where was Maggie? Or Ezra? Maybe Ezra had carried Maggie to the creek bank and was headed around the car to help Rita.

Hours later, Ray stood in Rutherfordton Hospital with Preacher Bob and various kinfolk. The group paced, reassuring one another. When a doctor finally walked into the waiting room, the group was surprised to see Ezra and Hud with him. Ezra's head was bandaged, his arm in a sling. Without speaking, Hud walked over and wrapped his arms around Ray's waist. Ray pulled the boy close. In time, Hud walked over and sat on the couch, shoulders slumped, arms hanging between his legs.

"The boiled down truth," Bob said to the doctor. "Don't hedge."

"Rita's right arm is broken; couple of head gashes. Minimum, bad concussion.

"How bad? Can we see her?"

"She's in and out of consciousness. One visitor, two minutes."

"Maggie?"

"In an induced coma. It'll be hours, maybe days before we know."

"How is it Ezra's walking?"

"Believe in miracles? Here's one." The doctor nodded at Ray. "She wants to see you."

Rita sat upright in bed, but slumped to one side. When Ray entered, she smiled, motioned for him to come closer. He held her hand until he knew she was asleep.

Seeing Ezra in the waiting room, he wanted to grab him, shake the hell out of him, scream, "You pathetic drunk. How could you let this happen!" Instead, he hurried outside where he bumped into James Mack, dressed in his sheriff's uniform.

"How you getting home?" James said, handing Ray his Harley keys. "Don't bother looking; it's in your shop."

They left in James' cruiser.

"It's more than luck you came by when you did," James said. "You up to it, I need to finish my accident report. Most of what I need I got from Ezra and Hud, and Bob.

"Bob was there?"

“You don’t remember?”

Ray shook his head.

“He came down the hill right after you—headed to my house to meet us. He saw you drop your bike and dive in. You remember yanking the front seat out getting to Maggie?”

Ray shook his head. “I remember her boots floating . . . and Rita screaming, ‘The babies, Ray, the babies.’ That’s all. Oh, and jumping in.”

“You wrenched the door off its hinges getting to Rita. Maggie was stuck under the seat where Hud couldn’t get her out.”

“I don’t remember,” Ray said, a wave of helplessness washing over him.

“She’d stopped struggling by the time you jerked the front seat out. You handed her to Bob. How he got her to the hospital on his bike, I don’t want to know.”

“Bob’s a good man.” Ray said. Then, sounding irritated, “Ezra looked okay.”

“Yeah, for getting knocked cold and sucking in half the Broad River”

“Sounds lucky he’s breathing.”

“Ezra’s breathing because you gave him mouth-to-mouth, Ray. You untangled him from brush downstream. By the way, ran a blood test on him—.”

“And?” Ray said, anger spiking inside.

“Stone sober.”

“Ezra was not . . . It was an accident?”

“Ezra was driving, all right. Left front tire blew—cut by a piece of metal. Best I can determine Ezra hasn’t had a drink in months. You don’t remember holding that Impala up when it fell, giving Hud time to swim to safety?”

Ray shook his head, then leaned over to rest his head in his hands.

At home, Ray fell across the bed. In seconds, he was asleep. In the middle of the night, he heard a ringing. It must have rung a long time because it sounded a mile away. The ring grew closer, pulling Ray back to consciousness.

“You awake? It’s Bob.”

Ray struggled upright on the bed edge. He held the receiver to his ear, but twice dropped it into his lap.

“Quit dropping the damn phone. It’s Rita.”

“Rita?”

“I’m coming to get you. Rita’s . . . she’s hemorrhaging.”

A few minutes later Bob and Ray were speeding to the hospital. They rode without speaking.

"I don't want to be Ray Snipes anymore," Ray said.

"What do you mean?" Bob said, giving Ray a sideways glance. "Ray Snipes is a damn good man."

"He's a little bastard that lies and burns churches."

Bob took a few seconds before answering. "You're exhausted."

"Can I tell you something? You don't have to keep it secret."

"Just talk," Bob said. "I'm listening."

"Before third grade, when Ezra's daddy died — when that abandoned church burned?"

"Don't recall a church burning. But yeah, my Dad preached Hank's funeral. Fell on his own ice pick, I recall."

"He didn't fall," Ray said. "Pops stuck it in him."

"My god, Ray. That's not what — why would you say such a thing?"

"I made it happen."

"Hell do you mean?"

"When Hank showed up mad that day, I raced to the barn. Through the slats, I saw Hank bracing Pops about the truck Judge Anvil had made Pops give him. Hank said the transmission had been doctored and broke down, stranding him in Marion. Pops told him, 'Your problem.'"

"Ray," Bob said, "you don't have to —."

"Hank came at him with that ice pick, Pops fired a bullet right over his head. Hank faked like he was leaving, but soon as Pops turned his back, Hank came again, jumped on Pops' back. Pops flipped him off, hard. Knocked the fight out of Hank."

"That must've been when Hank fell on his ice pick," Bob said. "Accidental self-defense."

"Listen. When Hank was heading towards Pops, I was about ten yards away, see . . . I saw him coming, started to warn Pops."

"I'm sorry you had to see it," Bob said.

"You're not hearing me. I didn't say anything because I wanted to see it. See that ice pick sticking out the top of Pops' bastard head. I hated him . . . for coming back from the war different. There was time to warn him. If Pops had turned with that pistol, Hank would've backed off."

"You don't know that, Ray. Nobody knows what he would've done. Hank was mean as typhoid. You were what, seven? What'd you know? You were a little boy, for Christ sake."

"I didn't want Hank to stop. But stunned on the ground like that, I thought Pops was going to help him up. Was like Pops thought about it, then grabbed the ice pick, buried it in Hank's chest."

“Jesus. That war messed up some good men. No way in hell you could’ve known.”

“All my life I been hating Ezra to keep from hating myself.”

For the rest of the trip, neither man spoke, except every minute or so Bob said, “Just a witness, Ray. Just a witness.”

In the hospital parking lot, several of Rita’s relatives stood talking with James. Ray kept walking.

Hud was asleep on the waiting room couch, his head on Ezra’s lap. When Ezra saw Ray, he eased Hud’s head onto a cushion and stood. Before Ray could find the courage to ask about Rita, Ezra said, “She’s gone, Ray, she’s . . . I don’t know who I am.”

To comfort Ezra, Ray could have reminded him of God’s master plan, try and help him believe Rita was in a better place. Instead, he walked over, pulled Ezra close to his chest, and held on.

GREGORY LOBAS

This Is How I Find You

In a blush of chanterelles by the creek flat,
gathering golden knurls, smattered
like daylight through shadowed
arches, a congregation of ferns.

On a bus ride, one distant barnyard
light that keeps its circle through the night.
I watch it recede into the dark rumble
of highway, my face turned back

to where we parted. In the husky voice
of rain, torrents outside my window calling
from the mountain, writing rivulets
in the garden where you tend your seedlings.

In air, which was the space of separation
then, but now is simply air again.

SEAN MADDEN

The Jam Session

In Bob Dylan's superb painting for the cover
of The Band's debut album, *Music from Big Pink*,
everyone's just monkeying round,
with Hudson and Manuel clambering over
the upright piano like a couple of
convicts escaping prison,
and Danko goofing off with a sitar
and a mauve teapot on his head, and Helm
banging out some soldier's tatter-tat on
a snare drum. I guess that's Robertson
in the foreground, because who else would it be,
and somebody must have invited
Sacagawea to play bass, and the elephant broke
out of the zoo just to get in on this raucous
occasion in Bob Dylan's superb painting for the cover
of The Band's debut album, *Music from Big Pink*.

SARAH McCANN

Children Playing at Hell

Deep color of Georgian ground, the clay
every thin dig draws blood.
Children collect

dried cicada shells in a jar—
pieces of the torn coat of a devil.
Red rings above the elbows,

like the age rings of a tree
which don't really count years, but disaster.
Poke caterpillars

on their shy undersides,
then roll piles of them
to dough.

Experiments turn fierce with children—
why so many dolls have lost their heads,
why fireworks are strapped

to soldiers and beetles—
They dress a dirty pearl of a cat,
born to look exactly like a moon,

in mud, to be a constant, twitching fire.

The Bookkeeper's Bench

From where he sat, he could see halfway down 49th Street to Park. It wasn't a comfortable perch, the big concrete planter, but it was the only place to sit on the block. On the East Side, in the '40s, there were no benches: the street encouraged you to move along.

He wasn't deterred. A small man, sixty-eight years old, he was healthy except for some joint pain he hardly noticed. Forty-Ninth Street had not been the only place he had sat and observed, but it suited him the best. There had been benches on the West Side, and down in the Village, although there, mothers with children glared at him for taking up the space. After a while, he would move on, wondering if an old man could become a beloved, or at least tolerated, fixture anymore—like those when he was a child.

Of course, when he was a child, the old men had been older somehow, enfeebled with years of manual labor or by the sudden end of that labor. Until he had gone to high school, the old men were always there, on the steps, in the stores, waiting. After high school, they vanished. Maybe they had still been there, and he no longer noticed.

A little "slow" all his life, he had liked school. Not in the fastest crowd, not the dopest, his life held few surprises. There had been girls—again not the prettiest or the fastest, but some—although none had stayed around long. He had felt their soft flesh, tasted their mouths, but they had kept the rest of their mysteries to themselves. The older boys talked of the Army, the younger knew of nothing before the war, and he—in the middle—had faint recollections of those years before ration cards and war bonds, without nostalgia. The war ended. Bang. Suddenly, there were choices to be made. With the war over, he was on the brink of something new, something which never materialized and for which eventually he stopped longing.

His mother was feeble, his father long gone. Without being told, he knew that he would have to fend for himself very soon. While still in high school, he got a job through a neighbor, having no idea how else to do it. Once he had the job, he stayed there.

By a rare stroke of luck, he worked in the office for most of his life, getting by with a night course now and then. His company, a small import/export firm in Brooklyn, had plodded through the '50s, '60s, '70s, '80s, and '90s, never big enough to feel permanent, never so small it failed.

He had worked at first in the warehouse, loading boxes onto trucks. Diligent and steady, he felt the job become his world, replacing the neighborhood, the old men on the steps. Nothing existed beyond the Gowanus Canal.

After a few years, Mr. Schreiber, the owner, had taken him into the office, praising his quickness with numbers. He felt a sense of fulfillment, as if something he could only think of as “the new” had arrived and was about to explode. He learned to wear a shirt and tie to work, just like Mr. Schreiber, never switching from long sleeves to short until the boss did. He kept a list of things to do on his desk, and carefully checked them off each day as he accomplished them, then erased the check marks for the next day.

In time, he became “the bookkeeper,” carefully logging inventory, sales, so many tiny transistor radios in, so many crates of greige out. Sometimes, he fantasized about the entries in the journal as he painstakingly printed them: “Greige” was marvelous elixir for the soul; “Units, PB” were rare jewels.

Eventually, Mr. Schreiber bought a computer. This, the bookkeeper did not like so well. The green letters on the screen were unfeeling, shoved into too few spaces: miles of Philippine lace tablecloths became “lacetabl,” losing whatever beauty they possessed as they disappeared into the machine, until descriptions vanished and only numbers remained.

For years, he maintained a paper ledger, working late nights and weekends several times a year just to keep it up. He never put in for overtime. He only dreamed of the day when the computer would refuse to work, would stall like a cranky horse. Then, amid the general consternation, he would pull out his paper ledger, all the figures clear and complete. Mr. Schreiber would smile at him, gently, gratefully.

The thought of that moment, which never arrived, still made him smile, even though he stopped keeping the ledger. Now Mr. Schreiber was gone, leaving three children who never cared much for the business, but rather floated in and out. Tall, handsome children, strapping boys, they had all gone on their own, a doctor, and accountant, a stockbroker. The doctor had married a neighborhood girl, Margie, a sassy smart brunette, who waggled a cigarette knowingly as she stood on the corner near the candy store. She and the doctor had been high school sweethearts—the same high school the bookkeeper had attended—and married in college.

None of the boys would take over Mr. Schreiber’s business. They had other lives, more exciting, less difficult, out with people who spoke good English, who didn’t sweat while packing crates of cheap glass figurines. Margie, however, loved the business, devoting long days to it, learning the ropes from her gentle father-in-law.

Some nights, as the bookkeeper hunched over his paper ledgers, he would watch Margie staring at boxes, poking the toys, counting dry goods, her fingers in the endless flow of things in and things out, and he wondered if she dreamed of secrets in the boxes and the numbers.

Outside the office, he barely noticed Brooklyn. When his mother died, he took a nice room, a short walk from work in a boardinghouse—which at some point became a “single room occupancy hotel,” although he didn’t know when. Mrs. P., who ran the place, was a cheerful woman, bighearted, big-bosomed, laughing as she scrubbed the walls and made the stew. Her cooking was terrible, but he always ate it. When he was late, she left him a bowl in the pantry, with a spoon and sometimes a cookie or a hard candy.

Once, when he had stayed very late with his ledger, Mrs. P. surprised him in the pantry. Even in the dim light, he could see her face was puffy with crying. She sat on the counter, as he ate silently, talking about someone named “Jack,” who was “no good,” a “rat bastard.” He supposed “Jack” was Mr. P., although he never saw anyone but the boarders.

As she spoke, he had felt something radiating from her, a longing, a need. Maybe she wanted him to hold her, maybe to do more, he never knew. Maybe I’m supposed to talk... he had wondered, waiting for a question he could answer. Mrs. P. did ask questions—but she answered them herself: “You’re out late tonight. Third time this week. You got a girl? ’Course you got a girl, nice guy like you.”

He wanted to set her straight, tell her that he had no girl, but she didn’t let him. By the time she was silent, the sentences he might have spoken had flown from his head. After a while, the food was gone, his dish washed: there was no reason to remain in the pantry. Awkwardly, he stammered good night, but she had forgotten about him, even as he stood there.

Later, with Margie’s and Mr. Schreiber’s help, he had found a small apartment, a few blocks away in subsidized housing, but a small building, not like the projects. By then, Mrs. P. had let in a rougher crowd, not nice working gentlemen, and she rarely laughed. It was time to leave.

For twenty years, he had lived in two rooms, with his own bathroom and a kitchen tucked into a corner of the living room. The day he had moved in, Mr. Schreiber had given him a television—almost new then. The bookkeeper watched it still, although now the picture was clouded with fuzz and the sound was scratchy. A neighbor had given him a nice couch; the bed came from the Spanish man on the corner. From his mother’s apartment, he had a box of dishes, pots, and utensils. The prior tenant left a table and two chairs.

He wiped the sink every time he used it, closed the toilet lid, as he had at Mrs. P.'s. He kept the rooms neat, his few possessions orderly: everything ready should a guest drop by.

For almost fifty years, he worked at Mr. Schreiber's. The old man had died and Margie took over the business, but it was still Mr. Schreiber's in his mind, and Margie never changed the name, even in conversation. Vaguely, he felt that "times" were good or bad or somewhere in between, but his own life had no such flows and eddies. Margie gave him a raise and a holiday bonus every year, without him asking.

When the business closed for a week each summer, he went to Coney Island, to a particular place, a long walk from the bus stop, where there were fewer people. Alighting from the bus, his money crumpled in his hand, he would walk faster and faster toward the entrance, growing lighter with each step.

One summer he arrived to find the place closed down. For a long time, he had stared at the boarded-up entrance, his cash growing wet in his fist. Finally, he returned to the bus stop. After that, he could never think of anyplace to go.

After he had turned sixty-five, Margie called him into her tiny office and told him that he could collect his pension and Social Security. She smiled gently, with Mr. Schreiber's face for a moment, like she had been the blood daughter. The bookkeeper was confused, unsure of what she was saying, until he realized that he was supposed to leave now and not return.

Margie had been very kind, telling him that she was selling the business; that she had held off for as long as possible, until most of the employees could find other jobs or retire. She was tired; she couldn't do it any longer. The bookkeeper couldn't remember if she had actually said that, or if he had thought it as he looked at her and noticed for the first time that she was no longer young.

Margie had said that she had saved his vacation time for him. With the pension, his vacation, and Social Security, he would hardly miss working, she laughed lightly. As she laughed, he knew that he was supposed to be happy, but the air thickened in the office, choking him. Unable to speak, he searched desperately for the words that would erase the moment, turn it into yesterday or the year before. Finally, Margie ran out of words too. Gently, she steered him out of the office, back toward his desk.

That afternoon, there had been a party, with the few coworkers who still remained and a few who came back. A cake, some flowers and balloons, gifts. Margie had given him a new watch with an old face. The others had bought him brightly colored shirts and shorts. Margie called a car service to bring him home with his gifts and the contents of his desk—a single boxful.

The gifts had been placed neatly on the closet shelf, awaiting a trip or a cruise. He rose each morning, put on his old watch, and waited for activity to occur to him. After a week of sitting at the table until dark, he left the apartment and headed for the bus stop. He waited for the bus that went to Manhattan. Once on the bus, he hadn't known what stop he wanted. He simply chose a corner and slipped guiltily into the first park, where he sat until four o'clock. Then he went home.

The next day, he had found a map of Manhattan in the telephone book and decided on Central Park. The bus driver explained about transfers and reminded him of his stop. Once at Central Park, he looked for the zoo, which he never found. Gradually, his horizons expanded: he began carrying pages torn from the phone book, marking the places he wanted to see, checking them off methodically. He bought a bus map and learned the free transfer points. Armed with this knowledge, he visited the Museum of Natural History, Columbus Circle, smaller parks, tiny fountains.

One day, he dozed on the bus and found it had turned south. He bought another map, a street map, in a bookstore and sat with a cup of expensive coffee, poring over the streets, learning the names of the sections of Manhattan: Greenwich Village. SoHo. Chinatown. Chelsea. All his life, he had navigated Brooklyn by sections—Red Hook, Prospect Park, Brooklyn Heights—but Manhattan had always been “The City,” monolithic, unsectioned, indivisible. Slowly, he parsed it like the sentence he remembered from school.

Walking slowly, he passed places whose names he recognized: Rockefeller Center, Radio City Music Hall, Central Park, Tiffany's. The Waldorf Astoria was particularly wonderful, with its huge lobby, the flowers and fantastic carvings. He almost sat in the dark, cool haven, but it had felt odd, so he had gone out a side door.

There, on 49th Street, he had found the planter. There was a bus stop nearby and a constant stream of tourists, workers, and vagrants. There was no doorman on the side, no one to notice that he only waited and never got on a bus. Red sightseeing buses stopped here, and once, he rode around Manhattan, pretending he spoke no English.

Soon, he found himself returning to this spot. He would never stay too long, a few hours, no more, carefully tracked on the new watch that Margie had given him, which he had finally taken from its box.

He discovered much on his perch—women, mostly. The women at Mr. Schreiber's had all been older, married, settled in body and spirit. Jewish at first, then Italian, black, and Puerto Rican, they were all weighted with responsibility, children and husbands.

The women on 49th Street, however, formed a collage of colors, sizes, textures. For the first time, the bookkeeper noticed things like hemlines (short), shoes (high and clunky), and colors (vivid greens, pinks, and oranges, punctuated with navy and gray). Soon he raised his eyes to find the faces as well: young women, with bare noses and powdered noses and colored eyelids and clean faces. Their skins were chocolate, milky white, sallow, rusty, smooth as glass, pitted. In their eyes and their manner, he imagined ambition, hope, pain, and despair. Lugging sleek briefcases or bulging backpacks, plugged into cellphones or headphones, they swirled around him, teasing him with imagined intimacy, leaving him in a moment.

One day, in early October, he stayed longer on his perch than usual—past six. The weather was particularly fine: crystal air, with a soft breeze sweeping out the bus fumes.

Something was happening at the Waldorf that night. Hired cars swooped in, discharging lovely women and trim men. He marveled that so many men owned tuxedos and could tie little bow ties. The women passed in beautiful gowns, filing the air with the click of their heels and the scent of their perfumes. The bookkeeper tried hard not to stare, but these people invited it. So rapt was his attention that he almost didn't hear the voice calling his name.

"Pete? Pete, is that you?"

A woman, elegantly coifed and gowned, looked at him expectantly. It took several seconds to recognize Margie.

"Mrs. Schreiber!" He slid from his perch, brushing the back of his pants, guiltily. Margie was quite near, having stepped from a yellow cab. She was wearing a long black dress, and her brilliant red toenails peeked from beneath it. In all the years they had worked together, the bookkeeper had never seen her toes or noticed the golden glint in her hair.

"Please, Pete, call me Margie. We're not at the business now." For a moment, they simply looked at each other, trying to pull their next sentences from the other's face.

Abruptly, she leaned into him, kissing his cheek. "I've missed you."

"I, uh, miss...uh, it too. Work."

She looked disappointed. "Oh, yes. It's hard to adjust. How many years was it? Fifty?"

"Forty-eight."

She looked over his head, distractedly. "How are you? You look fine."

"I am, Mrs. Sch— Margie. I'm in good health."

"You can get Medicare, you know, if you need it."

He smiled. "I know. Knock on wood"—he touched his skull—"no need yet." He glanced down, drawn to her toenails. "How is Doctor Schreiber?"

Laughing, she shook her head. "I divorced that bastard fifteen years ago. He was cheating on me with nurses, saleswomen, patients. Groping the girls' French teacher was the last straw."

Girls? Had there been children?

Margie continued merrily, "Tonight my younger daughter is being honored. She left Wall Street three years ago to work with battered women."

"Oh. That's...nice."

Chirping now, Margie spoke of her dress, how old it was, how little she ever wore it, how her daughter had offered to buy her a new one. She laughed at her "silly" shoes, raising her skirt a little, so he could get a better look. Her chatter was bright, enlivening the twilight. He lost the need for words after a few sentences, secure in the melody of her voice.

He began to feel the stirrings of something he could not name. For the first time since the end of the war, he felt the expectant blush of something unknown. The new was upon him, at last.

So absorbed was the bookkeeper in his expectations, he did not realize that Margie had stopped speaking. When she touched his arm, it did not break the moment, but washed it warmly over him.

"Pete. Are you all right?" Her face was close, her dark eyes concerned.

"I was just listening."

Margie laughed again, not so brightly. "My older daughter used to say that, when we caught her daydreaming."

He forced himself to laugh, although he feared that it would tear the delicate fabric that surrounded them. "Is she here too?"

Abruptly, the moment shredded, leaving only the growing darkness. Margie seemed caught between anger and tears. "My older daughter is dead. Her husband killed her."

The bookkeeper choked back a gasp. Yes! I remember now, he wanted to shout. Margie crying in the warehouse. Not so long ago: late, very late, only the two of them, the bookkeeper tending his paper ledger, Margie counting boxes, tears streaming down her cheeks, slapping the walls of cardboard so violently that the towers shook. "Ten! Twenty!" she shouted, her rage assaulting the tablecloths and bed linens, rising up against the stuffed animals as if they had created her pain.

The bookkeeper had ventured from his desk, absently holding the paper ledger, approaching Margie.

As he came closer, he tentatively asked. “Mrs. Schreiber?”

She had turned on him in fury, howls of rage interspersed with more articulate bitterness. As if in supplication, he held out his hand, the one with the ledger. She smacked it out of his hand, sending it spinning on the concrete floor, disappearing under a palette of off-brand light bulbs. Later, a forklift operator would uncover the ledger, and he would hear someone ask about the “old book—says ‘Journal’ on it,” but he would not claim it, not then or ever.

How had I forgotten that? he wondered. It was more momentous than anything in the haze of day and night that was his life, yet until Margie reminded him, there by the side door of the Waldorf Astoria, it had passed beyond him.

Margie calmed down, as if she, too, remembered the night and regretted her anger. Impulsive once more, she reached for his hand.

“It’s all right, Pete. I know you forget sometimes.” With that, she picked up the handbag she had left on the planter—his planter—and said goodbye. He watched as she passed through the brass and glass doors, up the carpeted stairs.

It was dark now. A chill had set in, but he watched until she was out of sight. She did not turn around.

As he stood, he tried to pull back the feeling that had passed—the floating, happy moment that his careless question had ruined. He wanted it back: a pinpoint of happiness, spreading like an ink stain on a white shirt. He wanted its promise. If the new were not here, could it be on its way? The new, carried by Margie, would be full of the light he had missed for so many years.

He would return tomorrow, he decided, to wait for Margie. He would ask her how the party had gone and compliment her on her dress. He wouldn’t forget.

Yes. That’s right.

He would remember to compliment her on her dress.

KEVIN J. MCDANIEL

Gray Heron

A gray heron hunkered
down,
to the size of an owl,
beside my pond

to harpoon
a fat, orange fish.
His feathered form
retracted

like an accordion playing
a long note
as his wings slapped
the rocks.

He raised his head
to unsheathe
a black bill that jabbed
the air.

I barked and then
clanged kitchen kettle lids.
He flapped clumsily
towards the house

on the hill
where he, undoubtedly,
snatched some of my neighbor's
smaller fish.

I wondered,
Do I tell him about
our long-legged pest,
or should I, like many others

living on our road,
only bother with what's mine
while he worries with
what's his?

In the morning,
the gray fiend visited
my pond again
to challenge me,

Put down your coffee cup!
Warn the poor man
of what's now flying in
his direction!

When I called,
my neighbor said,
God bless you,
friend.

My heart felt
much better, only after
I had responded
to a heron who challenged

my humanity.

ALEX MCINTOSH

10,000 Things

I tried to stay awake for the meteor shower,
the Perseid Outburst dripping fire, searing
white gold brackets across the sky. Sadly, I fell asleep
beneath an off-white ceiling, the fan humming
quiet circles, breathing coolness against
my face and hands. I once heard a man say, *God is
doing 10,000 wonderful things right now
and you're only aware of one.* I notice, though,
how the breeze from the fan lifts loose threads
from my grandmother's quilt, the streetlight
turning them gold. That would count for twelve things,
one for each thread. We must be underestimating.

SARAH MERROW

Bricolage

Long ago, ravenous for clarity
and longing to soar,
you adopted a raptor—
with a tinker's charm, you
summoned its generous wings.

For years you rolled down
bumpy streets, gathering
ornaments, nonsense, heartbeats
of rain in the bed of your truck,
the laughter of horses.

You wore a coat of crazy
colors, a black bib below
your rusty beard. 'Nothing to fear,'
you said, polishing the pots,
steady as a clock. Then, we

found feathers in your pocket,
banded, spotted, yellow, black
—meaning something to you—
a mutilated flicker in the last
town you rambled through.

KATHLEEN GLASSBURN

Clover's Latest Caper

Anna Morgan never recognized Clover's importance until she didn't come home one late-August evening.

Earlier that day Anna and her husband, Miles, had left the SeaTac airport parking lot in their Toyota Tundra and rushed to pick up the three dogs from a boarding kennel. After putting those canines in the backyard for a romp, she took an inspection tour. The outdoor feral cat, who was in charge of rodent control, hadn't lost any weight. The soil in numerous planters full of red and pink and yellow wave petunias felt moist to the touch. Newspapers had been tossed into the garage's recycle bin. But no Clover.

Anna went upstairs, a frown marring her still-pretty, tanned face.

Miles stood in the kitchen, sorting mail.

"Clover's not here," she said.

"Barry'll bring her back soon," he said.

Anna went in their bedroom, started unpacking, and quit puzzling over her turtle's whereabouts.

It had been a relaxing week at their cabin in the mountains—no telephone, no television, no Internet. The only thing to ruffle Anna's tranquility was a six-foot-long king snake slithering back and forth over a log close to the storage shed.

"Beautiful the way it moves," Miles remarked as he walked close to the reptile.

"I feel like passing out." Anna tripped on a step racing into the cabin.

Once the snake left the vicinity, their visit proved to be as pleasant as ever.

Then they returned home.

* * *

Twenty-five years ago Anna had shifted on a smallish chair in the front row of Kimberly's fourth grade classroom. The teacher, Miss Clemons, a stylish woman of about thirty with shiny dark-brown, chin-length hair, sat erect as a hollyhock at her desk and praised Kimmie's performance.

The last conference of the school year was coming to an end, but before Anna left Miss Clemons said, "Would you consider adopting our classroom pet?" She touched a terrarium atop a bookcase with a pink-nailed finger. "Your daughter gives her more attention than anyone else."

Clover blinked at Anna.

“You’d be doing me a big favor,” Miss Clemons continued. “We inherited her from a girl who moved away. We have to find someone to take care of Clover every break because I travel a lot.”

“Of course.” Anna ran fingers tipped by scraggly, unpolished nails across her own scraggly mop. What was one more animal added to their menagerie? Plus, a while back, she had decided the turtle could be her totem.

Some mysterious ailment had been sapping Anna’s energy. It was difficult to keep up with family, animal, and household responsibilities as well as working at a local pet shop. Trips of any sort brought on a week of convalescence. She’d taken to buying model turtles as souvenirs. They represented what Anna wanted most—to be comfortably situated back home.

Now she had a real live turtle. Considering her snake phobia and Clover’s head that looked like a snake’s, why wasn’t she disturbed? Anna realized it was the turtle’s protective shell, her four legs, and her plodding movement. She’d never startle anyone.

* * *

To be exact, Clover was a box turtle of the Mexican variety. She lived in a dry terrarium—eighteen inches by twelve inches by fourteen inches high. Every other day she got a bath for exercise and to soak up fluid. Afterward she freely thunked around the bathroom behind a closed door. She ate soft cat food and sometimes bits of melon or mango. She had a hinged shell on her underside. These two parts could close so that her head and legs were completely hidden and protected, making her resemble a big, brown rock. About the circumference of a softball, she was in her mid-twenties when Anna took Clover home, which made her about fifty at the time of the absence.

For the most part Clover’s decades with the Morgans had been uneventful. Other than soaks in the sink and trundles across the bathroom floor, she usually stayed in her terrarium. When they had guests she knocked on the glass, excited by the chatter and laughter. Quite the conversation piece, she’d often been taken out so that interested friends could see her up close, maybe even hold her. After introductions, with Clover poking her head out and waving her legs, they’d put her down on the rug. Invariably she ambled over to a corner, retreated into her shell, and stayed there until someone put her back in the terrarium. Enough socializing! In all the time they had her, Clover never was sick. A twenty-five-watt light bulb kept her environment at the proper temperature. Occasionally Miles changed her dirt, replacing the old with fresh soil from his garden. When this happened, Clover dug herself

a hidey hole and stayed there for at least a day—relishing the newness. Miles was also the person who took care of Clover’s baths and feedings.

One weekend the Morgans had overnight guests for their village arts festival. The television was on and news people were covering OJ Simpson’s getaway scene in his white Bronco. Anna took Clover out for these friends to meet. Because of the distracting drama, she got dropped. They all anxiously examined her to ascertain that her shell was intact and that she seemed to be all right.

Once Clover was safely back in her terrarium, Miles commented, “Curious situation. OJ’s running away from presumably murdering his wife and her friend, and we’re panic-stricken over the wellbeing of a turtle.”

Another time, in the midst of remodeling their house, heat duct covers had been removed in several rooms. Clover was free in the bathroom, where a missing cover had been forgotten. Instead of crawling to the corner and closing up, she tumbled into the heat duct.

Miles said, “She’ll die and we’ll have to figure out how to get rid of the smell.”

Kimberly and her mother knelt by the opening with a candle burning and prayed for Clover’s safe return.

After an hour or two, Miles came to the doorway and said, “Rather than praying, why not blow out the candle and get some food?”

A scoop was placed on Clover’s little dish and set in the heat duct, and they all went to bed. Next morning the food remained untouched, and Kimmie went to school with her head hanging low.

Several hours later Anna was playing a sad Chopin piece on the piano when she heard a scratch–scratch–scratch. She dashed into the bathroom, and there was Clover, gobbling away. Elated, Anna tucked her in the terrarium and hustled off to Kimberly’s sixth grade class with the happy report.

She dubbed this event: Clover’s Big Adventure.

About this time Anna’s health issues were diagnosed and resolved. With normal energy restored, trips became a delight again, and she quit buying model turtles.

* * *

When the Morgans began adding animals to their family, she found Barry, the petsitter, through a newspaper ad. During her interview he seemed like a nice enough guy, so she chose to ignore the snake tattoos on his hands. Barry stayed in the house only once. The Morgans’ first dog was a German shepherd with digestive issues. After sleeping in too late one morning, the

petsitter awoke to a real mess. On subsequent trips their dog or dogs were boarded, and Barry took care of the outdoor cat or cats, as well as the turtle, from the garage.

At some point he said, "Would it be okay if I took Clover to my apartment? She'll get more attention that way." He stood jingling change and keys in the pockets of his khaki jacket.

"That should be fine," Anna told him.

Before the next trip Anna insisted that she and Miles bring Clover to the petsitter's basement apartment in a split level. "That way we can make sure it's okay."

Miles nodded with a "Hmmpf."

This trial arrangement proved to be satisfactory, and after that he would place Clover and her terrarium in the garage when leaving, along with Barry's pay. The petsitter picked up his charge, and she'd be waiting in the garage when the Morgans returned. This happened more times than Anna could possibly remember.

Over the years Barry told her how fond he was of Clover. One time, he said, "I have my own turtle now. When your turtle comes to visit, they play together." More than once he said, "I'd be thrilled to take Clover if you ever want to find a new home for her."

Miles was all for this.

Since Kimberly had moved to the East Coast, Anna sent an email telling of Barry's offer.

Kimmie wrote back, Clover is part of our family!

When Barry again broached the subject, Anna said, "No. She means too much to us."

* * *

While loading dirty clothes from the cabin trip into the washing machine, Anna got a phone call.

"I hate to tell you this...Clover is missing," Barry said.

"Missing?" How can you lose a turtle? "What happened?"

Through numerous conversations Anna pieced together that Barry had let her turtle go outside with his turtle and Clover had wandered off.

Seemingly it would have taken several minutes for her to trudge away and out of sight, but he said, "I just stepped over to the picnic table."

On one of Anna's calls, he said, "Clover was in a wire enclosure, but I guess she slipped through an opening because she's smaller than Chauncey."

During another of Anna's calls, Barry told her, "I lost my own turtle a while back. He showed up eighteen days later."

If you lost one turtle, why did you put him, as well as Clover, in your yard again?

"I never gave you permission to take her outside," Anna said with a catch in her voice. "I thought you let her play with Chauncey in a closed room."

Barry hemmed and hawed and repeated, "I really feel bad about this."

You feel bad! How about me?

"It was careless and negligent." A betrayal of trust.

Barry agreed that his behavior had been reprehensible. "I've posted notifications around the neighborhood, and I've put messages on five websites, and I've called Animal Control, and I've told my turtle group."

Turtle group?

"The whole neighborhood is looking for her. A friend with hunting dogs came over. They sniffed Clover's dish and searched the yard—with no luck."

"Have you put out her food?"

"Oh, that's a good idea."

"She likes melon and mango," Anna added. "You could try them."

After a few days Miles said, "She's a goner—can't last outside during these cold nights."

The petsitter kept saying, "I'm sure she'll turn up. I've lit a candle for her."

Anna lit her own candle, hoping that a raccoon or coyote hadn't chomped down on poor Clover. She also kept thinking about Barry's claims of affection. Did he keep Clover? Was this an elaborate ruse with the expectation that Anna would give up and forget about her? Was Barry willing to lose a good client?

At the end of the first week, the petsitter brought the terrarium back to Anna. He seemed genuinely upset, his pink skin turning bright red.

Anna fought back tears. "Maybe she'll come out one day to bask in the Indian summer sunshine." Her lips pursed. "What does 'Licensed, Bonded, and Insured' on your business card mean?"

"That's for dogs."

"I don't expect money but has anything like this ever happened before?"

Barry sadly shook his head.

"What's your address?" It had been a long time.

He hesitated, making that jingling noise with the change and keys in his pockets, before giving the information to Anna.

Feeling like a detective, she wrote the location on a yellow notepad. “What do you think I should do? Who should I tell?”

Ignoring the implied threat, Barry reiterated all that had supposedly been done to find Clover.

“It would have been easier if she’d died on your watch.” Anna sniffed.

Barry jerked his head back, stunned by this idea.

Soon after, he departed—leaving Anna with her empty terrarium.

* * *

Eventually she was forced to call Kimberly.

“He kept her. You said how much he liked her. I’m sure of it,” she responded after a couple of minutes to absorb this shock.

“I don’t want to believe that of Barry.” Anna’s shoulders slumped. “I’ll keep checking.”

One early morning she parked her truck a block away and crept to the pet-sitter’s basement apartment. With barely a glance she snuck by artwork on the side of the house. No one was around so she roamed the yard, searching under overgrown vines and bushes that might provide burrowing opportunities. She traipsed along nearby streets but never discovered any postings on utility poles—“Lost Turtle”—or that sort of thing. She drove into the village and stopped by the police department.

“How do I get a search warrant?” she asked the officer on duty.

“What do you need it for?”

“I think my pet-sitter may have abducted my turtle.”

“Your turtle?”

“She’s our beloved pet.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, ma’am.” He shook his head. “Never heard of such a thing.”

“I’d like to look through his premises.”

“Why don’t you just keep talking to him. Let him know how important this is to you. Maybe he’ll bring your turtle back.”

Anna sighed deeply and headed for the door.

She missed the officer’s bemused expression and raised eyebrows directed toward the receptionist.

When she told Miles about her failed attempts at retrieval, he advised, “You should let the whole thing go.”

Anna did begin to wonder: If the pet-sitter had turtlenapped Clover, would she be better off with him, albeit accomplished through a hurtful, unethical act? Or, she considered: Maybe, at fifty years old, it was better for Clover to have a last shot at freedom.

Still she continued to call Barry every day, only to receive consistent negative responses.

"I drove by your apartment," Anna told him. "I didn't see any posters in the neighborhood."

"Gee...um...I put them in mailboxes."

Several times a day Anna stared at the empty shelf in their family room, and her eyes burned like a flickering candle, her chest expanded as if full of molten wax.

* * *

A month after Clover's disappearance, Barry called Anna. "I can barely contain myself. She's been found."

Anna gave a silent thank you. "Where? How?"

"She was soaking up sunshine on the cement patio."

"That's incredible. I'll come right over to get her."

Meanwhile Miles prepared the cleaned-out terrarium and said, "I'll bet you anything he's had her all the time."

"You think?"

* * *

Clover was in a topless, plastic storage container. Barry included a laminated poster with the turtle's picture and information about her. There was a minuscule staple on top. However, the prongs were tightly closed.

Anna put Clover and the plastic container next to her on the truck's floor. Needless to say, she didn't hang around for any chitchat. This time she took notice of five art festival wooden plaques on the house's outside wall, near the entrance to Barry's basement apartment: Live, Learn, Laugh, Love, Life.

Halfway home she heard Clover trying to crawl out of the plastic container. Anna stopped the truck and put it onto the seat and held her hand over the turtle for the rest of their trip.

On a phone call to Kimberly with the revelation of Clover's safe return, Kimberly said, "I think he kept her hostage for breeding purposes. His turtle needed a mate."

"She's fifty years old!"

"You've said it yourself—they live forever."

* * *

At first Clover repeatedly bumped against the glass wall of her terrarium and attempted to scale the sides.

Anna questioned: Would she be happier in our backyard? Should I set her loose? How could she possibly survive?

Deciding that she must give Clover more attention, Anna took over giving baths. For a while Clover tried to clamber out of the sink, but she resumed her lumbering walks behind the closed bathroom door, and she ate the food that Anna put in her terrarium. One time Anna put her on their deck for a supervised stroll amongst the potted gold and orange and rust chrysanthemums but was surprised when Clover took off at a run and had to be chased. She could have fallen under the railing and into the rockery below.

It took a couple of weeks but Clover's animation did calm. Resignedly she dug holes in her soil and covered up.

When this happened, Anna felt certain she was dreaming: Clover's Grand Escapade. Upon her reappearance there was a wistful smile lifting the mouth of her little snake face.

CAMERON MORSE

Leaves of Ivy

Japanese beetles gnaw the leaves
of the ivy that insinuate themselves
among chain links in the back yard.
In the shadow of the maple
sapling I planted in the summer

of my first seizure, I enter my fourth
autumn since diagnosis. Feelers
waving, legs clasped, the iridescent
eaters perforate light
green, eating all but the lineaments

of the leaf, the dream of a life
emptied of journalistic details: no place
of birth, no marriage
certificate, no diagnosis, just a figment
of my own imagination.

STEPHANY L. NEWBERRY-DAVIS

Daddy

He sits with arms crossed
and a snarl on his face.
The wad of chew settles in his cheek,
leaks spit down the corner of his crooked mouth.
His hands cracked and creased from wind and sun
fold one over the other, skin like ash.

Sweet blood seeps from my lip split and swollen.
Hands fixed round my neck.
Feel my legs limp and my head heavy.
Hear my mama cry out, *Let her loose*,
and long for life to leave me.

The morning after my insides were torn and stitched back together,
he came to my hospital room where as a child I lay ruined.
No words spoken to me, only to my mama,
Tell her to eat something so we can go home.

The morning I lay legs open laboring to bear my first born,
he came to my hospital room where as an adult I lay exposed.
Screamed for him to leave, my modesty spent.
He slammed the door, cursing me under his breath.
His tongue sharp, the words more agonizing than the severing of my body in two.

He hides his eyes indoors.
They burn holes each time I turn my back.
He studies me, I know.
Watches me each time I reach to hold my son's hand,
whisper love into my daughter's ear.
He hears my words to others as I try to fill silence with sound.

Mama says that I'm the one to blame,
that I should *dry up and blow away*.
She says, *He could easily have gone the other way,*
turned like bad meat.

JEANNE OBBARD

Reindeer, Lightning

In Hardangervidda
abruptly
lichen and stone

collect our greywhite selves
from an overwash
of blue summer.

The biologists say they don't understand
how hundreds could be struck at once
but those who huddle know

that electricity, stark, that
runs from ear to tail and ear to tail
in nights without witnesses,

in dreams folded between winters
how we of one breath are called with one breath
into the placid earth and forever rock,

sun and antlers laid across us like swords.
If you don't remember such ends, it's because you have already
held the golden branch to your head

and become.

LUBA OSTASHEVSKY

Rituals Done to Us

Driving to do this and take care of that,
in an unfamiliar part of Queens,
I stopped at a red light and saw a woman
step out of a church's side door.
A white wool shawl covered her head.
It was December, not very cold but also not warm.

A long time ago, age four or five,
I stood on the front door mat,
already in boots,
and my mother crouched in front of me
lining the long side of a white wool shawl
along my forehead.

Most of what I recall of Russian winter
was from how fast the shawl came down,
my two ears burning with the itch,
how calmly I was spun around so that the sheared sheep coat
could be hoisted from the back.
And I, by myself, put on the mittens
that dangled from the sleeves with elastic straps.

How when we got outside I tried to step
into the shoeprint a step away
and how the snow broke up the light
from the iron-wrought streetlamps
into blue, red and yellow bits.
When the shawl came off indoors,
my hair stayed damp for a few sweaty minutes.
She did this every day.

I don't know who dressed the unknown woman
or what cold country she was born in.
After the light turned green, I drove forward.

STEVE LAMBERT

A Song for Enid Pound

Frank stuck his hand out the window as he drove and let the wind move it. It looked like a fish swimming against a strong current. The stillness of the town reminded Frank of the movie *Omega Man*, of Charlton Heston thinking he was the last man on Earth. This early everything downtown was closed up except Sunrise Diner and the Jiffy, two places that did not draw huge crowds anyway; Confederate Park, in the center of downtown, looked like a cemetery. Frank stopped at the Jiffy and bought a twelve-pack of Busch.

He liked the peace and quiet of the mornings, and Saturday morning was usually the quietest and most peaceful of all. Most folks were still sleeping off hangovers, or just taking their time, savoring the long morning.

As he drove and drank, his mind drifted back to Ben, who he'd spoken to early Friday morning about a couple cases he was working on. Frank had hired Ben, two years before his own retirement, on Delores's recommendation. A good boy, she'd called him, who just needed something to care about. (Ben was some degree of cousin to Delores.) Frank took him on without question, mostly because Delores was, by then, already quite sick, and Frank's anguish and guilt and helplessness had turned him into a pure devotee to his dying wife, something he had failed to be when she was well. Frank's life for those six months had a singular purpose: do whatever Delores asked of him. Ben became a direct beneficiary of this single-mindedness. And, sure as shit, she'd been right; he'd become a passionate and dedicated officer of the law. But, thought Frank, he never did quit being an asshole.

The first case Ben had mentioned involved an old drunk named Kermit, who they both knew, and he'd told Frank the story for amusement. Kermit had robbed Bub's liquor store, armed with only his hand in a brown bag, made out with almost three hundred collars. He took the money to the IGA three blocks over and bought two bottles of Night Train and drank himself into a stupor and passed out around back. When he woke, he walked back over to Bub's and tried to buy some Black & Milds and a bottle of Wild Irish Rose, completely oblivious to his earlier illicit transaction. But no one wanted to press charges, not the cashier or the store owner. "When he ain't making poor decisions he's one of my best customers," said Bub.

"This ain't no goddamned Mayberry," said Ben. "Folks is got to be held accountable. Ain't that right, Mr. Frank?"

Frank said he reckoned. When he was sheriff he'd always been more concerned with the weight of a punishment, and whether or not it outweighed the crime. Fairness, in his eyes, was most important, and he'd considered himself a fair person.

"One more thing," said Ben. He propped his arm up on the door of Frank's pickup. "Could you keep an eye peeled for Enid Pound?" Turned out she'd reported her husband, Walter, missing a few days earlier and Ben wanted to talk to her. A charred body had been found in an old orange grove in Durdin, a biker town two counties south of Sahwoklee, and there was reason to believe it was Walter, but they needed Enid to take a look to know for sure.

"Don't expect me to go hunting for her," said Frank.

"No, sir," said Ben. He stepped away from the truck and casted the line of a phantom fishing rod. "Been a while since we got our lines wet." Eventually, and against his better judgment, Frank ended up in front of the old house on Avenue G, the place where Frank and Delores had spent the bulk of their married life together. One of the front windows had a softball-sized hole in it now, and a few loose shingles hung down over the edge of the roof. The grass in the front yard was the color of bad hay and the only green was the five or six dense clumps of chickweed and clover here and there.

The tall, far-reaching oak that twisted out from the center of the yard, dormant now for winter but still hung with grey-blue Spanish moss, was in dire need of trimming. Delores' once impressive knockout roses, which ran along the face of the house on either side of the front porch, had died out finally in the last hard freeze and looked now like bramble. It was hard on Frank, seeing the place like this, everything dead or dying. But he came anyway because if he tried hard he could see her.

He watched as they went about the small daily things that, on good days, they had quietly relished. Frank saw himself crouched down in front of the lawn mower, priming the engine, and he saw Delores on tiptoes, arched across one of her rose bushes, clippers in hand, reaching for a stray branch. Now Delores walked over to a young calico, named Fritz, who often wandered onto their property, and coaxed it toward her with a cupped hand. He saw them both at twilight, sitting on the porch steps, surveying the results of their labor and care, he with the rare beer in hand and she with a tall glass of sun tea, front door open behind them, and Tammy Wynette, Delores' favorite, on the record player, whining beautifully about her no-good man. A moment like this could be a whole afternoon for Frank.

Finally, a terse yowl pierced the bubble of his recollection.

He looked up the road and saw Enid Pound picking herself up off the road and climbing back onto her pathetic-looking beach cruiser bicycle. Well I'll be damn, thought Frank. This is a providential development. Enid touched her knee and winced, looked down at it. She squinted in Frank's direction and shrugged, as if to say, "So what?" She got poised to pedal away and Frank held up his beer, like a tease, and took a slow sip of it. Enid saw and pedaled toward Frank.

Still seated on the saddle of her bike, she propped her forearm on the door of Frank's truck. Frank didn't give her time to ask. He handed her a beer.

She put her feet down on the ground, straddling the top tube of the bike, and cracked the tab on the beer and took a thirsty drink of it.

"You're welcome," said Frank.

Enid licked her lips and examined the can.

"You don't go in for the high-dollar shit, do you?"

Enid, mantis-thin and wiry, looked much older than her thirty-five years. She had a small, sharp face, and her mouth, devoid of teeth, collapsed in on itself, like a turtle's. Her complexion was sun worn, and despite the lingering coolness in the air, she wore only a stained white tank top and very short cut-off jeans with an uncountable number of white strings dangling off the ends. Thin pink flip flops cradled her filthy, narrow feet. At the ball of her shoulder a blurry red rose hovered over the name "Walter," in India ink.

Frank drank from his lukewarm beer. "What you up to, besides falling off that contraption you got there?" Frank wanted to see if she knew anything about Walter. If she did, she'd say so. She was not one to miss out on an opportunity for some pity or charity.

"Headed over to Fuzzy's. Walter ain't been home for days. Figure he might be there. Good place to start looking anyhow. Not that I really give a rat's ass where he is." She glanced Westward, in the direction of Fuzzy's, as if she could see it from where she stood, then looked back at Frank. She drained the beer can of its contents and chucked it into the bed of Frank's truck. "He owes me fifty dollars."

"Why's that?"

"I'd rather not say." She smiled at Frank. "But I'll tell you if you give me another one of them cheap-ass beers."

Frank reached over and got her one.

She cracked the tab and took a long drink of it.

"Well," said Frank.

"They getting warm, ain't they?"

“You know what they say, beggars can’t be choosers.”

“You spot me till I find him?”

“Spot you what?”

“The fifty. Wunst I find him I’ll pay you back.” She winked at Frank.

“You never did tell me why he owes you in the first place.”

“We did veer off track, didn’t we?” Enid drained the last bit of beer and chucked the can in the back of Frank’s trunk. It kissed a few of the other empties on impact.

“It seems that way.”

“Let’s just say he lost a bet, and leave it at that.”

“That beer was worth more of an explanation than that.”

“No it wasn’t.”

Frank looked over her sorry bike. It had an unintentional camouflage of about six different colors of paint on it: probably an indication of how far removed the bike was from its original and only legitimate owner. In the rare small areas where there was no paint at all, red-brown rust had set in. The seat was scuffed to the stuffing on both sides. The handlebars had no grips of any kind and the tires were bald. He knew that if he gave her any money he’d never see it again.

“Tell you what I’ll do. I’ll give you a ride,” said Frank. “Step away from the door and I’ll throw that hunk a shit in the back.”

Fuzzy’s Bar was nothing more than a skirtless doublewide trailer with a wide front deck on it made of pressure treated lumber. Frank had often thought that in the event of a category two or higher hurricane the deck would be the only thing left standing. It was late morning now and the sun in full blaze had brought the temperature up into the mid-seventies.

A white and brown pit-bull sat on its haunches next to the right corner of the deck, chained to a deck post. It perked up as Frank pulled his truck into the parking lot.

One other vehicle was in the lot, a white F-150 with tinted windows that Frank knew belonged to Roof Maguire, one of the bartenders. Frank got out and unloaded Enid’s bike. As he got close to the deck, the dog started prancing and wagging its nub of a tail. He leaned the bike against the deck, and the dog gave a clipped attention-getting bark. Enid grabbed a metal bowl that was turned over in the mud. The dog watched eagerly, licking its muzzle, as she filled the bowl with water from a nearby spigot. It watched her walk the bowl back and it began lapping at the fresh water before she even had a chance to set the bowl down.

“Surprised the damn thing ain’t dead yet. Don’t nobody look after it.” She shook her head at the dog and walked up the wooden steps.

“Guess I’ll go in and have one with you,” said Frank. “Ain’t in a hurry to rush off nowhere.”

Enid made a beeline for the restroom and Frank walked straight to the bar. Roof Maguire—tall, lean and dark-haired—had tended bar at Fuzzy’s for nearly twenty years. Fuzzy Waid, the owner, had never in all that time found a reason to fire him, and Roof had never found a reason to quit. Roof’s mother, a full-blooded Creek from southwest Alabama, had been knifed to death in a bar on the outskirts of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, many years ago. Frank remembered it well because the man who’d been convicted of killing her was from a small town in Sahwoklee County, his county, with the improbable name of Antarctica. Roof was probably not a bad sort, thought Frank, but he was quiet and solitary and, consequently, hard to get a fix on.

“What you doing here this time of day, Sheriff?” said Roof in his peculiar half-Indian drawl.

“Throat’s a little scratchy.”

Roof nodded his head toward the ladies room. “What about your present company? You slumming it or something?”

“Be nice, Roof.”

Frank walked carefully across the barroom to a table in the corner.

Enid came out of the ladies’ room and scanned the area. She saw Frank and walked toward the table.

“First one’s on me,” said Frank. Enid cleared her throat and sat down.

Frank looked around, taking in details, an old cop’s habit. The place had a cave-like quality, and smelled of stale beer and old cigarette smoke. It was, Frank thought, what a bar ought to be: a dark, forgiving respite from the harsh brightness of the outside world.

“Guess Walter ain’t here,” said Enid.

“Nope.” Frank took a swig of beer.

“Guess he could be just about anywhere.” She glanced toward the front door as if at any second he might walk in, and then looked down at her beer. She turned her brown, too-old face toward the desperate blink and flicker of the jukebox on the other side of the bar. “Why don’t you play us a song, sheriff?”

“Ain’t really in the mood for music.” Frank motioned toward Roof. When Roof looked up, Frank held up two fingers. Roof nodded. Now that Delores was gone, Frank did not listen to music. Every bit of music in the old house, every CD, tape and record, had been Delores’s. She’d loved old country, especially the ladies, singing about how hard it was to be a woman,

how hard it was to love their two-timing men. He didn't even listen to music when he was driving around anymore; only talk radio, if anything, and you couldn't really call what he did listening. Instead, he liked to ride with the windows down if it was not too hot or too cold and listen to the sounds outside. Getting rid of all that music was one of the hardest things he did after she died.

Frank drank from his glass and then held it out in front of his face, examining it like some oddity he'd just come across. "Never realized. They got some tee-niny drinking glasses here."

Enid put down her nearly empty glass and flopped against the back of her chair. She glared at Frank. She didn't speak. Roof walked up and sat two glasses down and grabbed the empty ones.

"Roof," said Frank, "how come these here glasses are so small?"

"They're not small, sheriff. You've just got really big hands." Roof walked off.

Enid picked up her fresh beer and took a small sip and set it back on the table. She reached into the top of her shirt and pulled out a crumpled pack of no-name cigarettes. She dug one out and then fished her finger around in the cellophane wrapper until she brought out a nearly empty book of matches. She paused. "Let me ask you something."

"Shoot," said Frank.

"The hell you doing here with me, sheriff? This must be rock-bottom for you." Her voice was harried sounding, like it had had to fight its way up and out of some deep, craggy place inside her.

Well, thought Frank, she might be sorry, but she ain't stupid.

"Just bored, I guess," he said, trying to keep a casual tone. "By the way, ain't sheriff no more. Wish everybody'd quit calling me that."

"Might help if you stopped acting like one." She lit the cigarette and took a long, hard drag of it, an act that seemed to enlist the whole bottom third of her small face.

"No, you right." He took a sip of his beer. "Change is hard, I guess." He took another sip and continued his slanted line of inquiry. "Speaking a change, what you still doing with that Walter, anyhow? Bet you could have left him a hundred different times for a hundred different reasons."

"Hell, Frank! I don't know." She held out her hands, palms up, in an oddly girlish display of sarcasm. "Who else is there?"

"All right, settle down," said Frank. He didn't want to scare her off. After a while Enid got a buzzed, dreamy look about her and stared off in the direction of the jukebox again. "You sure you don't want to play us a song, Frank? I'd like to hear something sad."

"I ain't playing no goddamn music," he said flatly.

She sighed and waved a hand at Frank. She looked over at the jukebox and watched the lights dance for a moment. She chuckled, like she'd thought of something mildly humorous, and turned to Frank. "I do hate him, though...I really do. I slam hate the look of him," she said, a dim look on her face. "Hates me, too. Might say we was made to hate each other. Might say we love to hate each other." She chuckled again and brought the cigarette to her lips. She exhaled. "Maybe it's just outta habit. You start doing something, and it's easy enough, so you just keep doing it. It don't have to be right. It's just got to be easy."

"Sounds like a real fairytale you got there, Enid." Frank leaned back and crossed his legs. "Easy is something, I guess." He had a hard time imagining anything being "easy" in relation to Walter Pound. Enid herself didn't look like she'd had an easy go of anything in life. "That's a real nice philosophy you got there, Enid, but it don't tell you where Walter is right now, does it?" Frank watched Roof walk up to the entrance, open the door, stick his head out into the sunlight, and retreat back inside. As he walked back behind the bar, he muttered something that sounded like "stupid dog."

Enid put her full attention on Frank's eyes, stared right into them. "You know something you ain't telling me, Frank? They got Walter locked up or something?" She put her cigarette out in the ashtray.

"What you asking me for? Done told you I ain't sheriff no more." Frank didn't want to say anything about what Ben had told him. He didn't think it was his place to, not anymore. After all, he was just Frank now. Not Sheriff. Not husband. Just Frank. Just nobody.

"Who the hell cares," she said. She crossed her legs and looked around the room. Her elbows were on the table now and her shoulders curved forward. The front of her tank top hung down, allowing Frank, if he'd wanted one, an easy glimpse of the limp, sagging things within. He thought about Enid in relation to Delores. They were like two separate species almost. He took a moment to let his mind drift in vague thoughts of this nature. The sheer variety of humanity, he thought.

Enid leaned in towards the middle of the table. "I got a idea, sheriff."

"What's that?" said Frank, as he pulled his mind back into the moment.

"It's just since you ain't sheriff no more—like you said." She looked flirtatiously at Frank. "Why don't you let me take you in the back and tighten you up?" She licked her loose, wrinkled top lip. "I'll even give you a discount."

Good God, thought Frank. What a woman. He considered all the times he'd taken her in for prostitution or solicitation. And here she was, no idea where her husband was, and not skipping a goddamn beat.

“That’s real tempting, Enid,” he finally said. “But I’m gonna pass.”

“When’s the last time you was with a woman, Frank?” She put her hand on his. “Delores been gone a good long while now...” She started caressing his hand.

He didn’t like the way “Delores” sounded coming off of Enid’s limp, disfigured lips. He slowly removed his hand from under hers.

She sighed and started for another cigarette. Just then the room brightened up and the front-door hinges screamed. In the doorway stood a paunchy, stooped man in his early sixties. Enid and Frank took the time to watch him walk to the bar and take a seat.

She turned back to Frank and stuck the bent cigarette between her lips and lit it. “Ain’t Walter,” said Enid. She slowly tapped her fingertips against the table.

“Say he was locked up, Enid. Say something terrible had happened to Walter. Wouldn’t say you looked too damn worried one way or the other.” Frank was curious for himself now. He wanted to understand her attitude. He wanted to know how a person could be so unaffected in the face of something like this. She had no idea where he was or what kind of condition he was in.

She took a drag of the cigarette and exhaled to the side. “Guess I can go about being worried without making a big fuss, sheriff. It’s all those years of practice paying off.” She coughed and something rattled inside her. She looked intently at Frank. “You sure you don’t need to tell me something?” Frank shook his head and looked at his beer. “Naw.”

Enid seemed to lose interest in her talk with Frank. She looked over her shoulder at the man at the bar. She put her smoke out and stood up. “This here’s run its course, ain’t it, Mr. Frank?”

“I guess it has,” said Frank.

Without saying another word to Frank, Enid turned and walked up to the man at the bar and sat down next to him.

Frank wasn’t sure why he didn’t tell Enid about what Ben had said, about the body, probably Walter’s, waiting to be identified. Maybe he sympathized with her in some way. He figured that when she did find out, if the body was Walter’s, she’d be sad—a little—and then she’d move on. She wouldn’t dwell on it. She wouldn’t let his death stop her from living her life, as meager a life as it was. Frank reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He unfolded it and stood it up on the table so that the picture of Delores was facing him. She was standing in the yard of the house on Avenue G, shoeless, her hands on her hips and her head cocked to the side, a big, beautiful smile on her face. A picture of her happy and healthy—before infidelity and sickness had mauled them out of her. He sat and drank and

looked at her for a while. Delores, three years gone now, and he still had no idea how to go about the living of his life.

He saw Enid get up and walk halfway to the bathroom. She stopped and glanced back at her companion at the bar and turned and walked the rest of the way to the bathroom. The man got up and followed her.

Son of a bitch, thought Frank.

“You gonna let that go on in here?” Frank shouted at Roof.

“Let what?” said Roof. “I ain’t seen nothing.” Roof smiled and stuck his hand in his pocket.

After about fifteen minutes, the man reappeared and took up his seat at the bar. Shortly after, Enid came out and walked over to the jukebox. She looked at Frank and put a dollar bill in the slot on the jukebox and picked her songs. While she was selecting her last song the first one came on. It was Willie Nelson singing, “Hello Walls.”

Enid walked backwards a few steps, looking at Frank, winked, and turned around and headed back to her spot next to the paunchy old man, where a drink waited for her. She did not sit down. She stood and rocked back and forth to the music.

Frank looked down at Delores with that teasing, sexy smile on her face. He decided he’d slowly finish his beer and leave, but after Willie finished up the next song that came on was Tammy Wynette singing, “I Don’t Wanna Play House,” a song that Frank knew he could not sit through.

He drained his beer, put his wallet back in his pocket, slowly stood up and walked to the other side of the small table and picked up the chair Enid had sat in. He carried it across the room and held it up over his head and brought the seat of it down on top of the jukebox. Glass shattered and flew. The lights on the jukebox blinked erratically. He swung the chair down onto the jukebox two more times until, finally, Tammy purred, “...daddy said goodbye,” and the whole thing slurred to a stop.

ROSEMARY PEEK

Drought

The bones of the river stick out
like an ancient old woman lying back, resting.
Tired. All knees and elbows and assorted joints.
Hip bones, once rounded, now jutting out awkwardly.
Sharp, small knuckles appear here and there.
The knobby spine where the water trickles
through the gaps.

The Cherokee call it The Long Man,
but how could a river be anything but a woman?
Winding her way around mountains,
the river is now skinny and dry.
Fish swim thick and sickly just under her shiny skin.
The men wade in, breaking her mercury-like surface.
Or they glide across it, as they play at being her master.

Her gaze is ever skyward,
ever searching for her sister rain.
To heal her, restore her,
set her free to run fast and wild beyond her banks.
To show then no man shall ever be her master.

GEORGE PERREAULT

Chamisa

dog and I go out round noon, October
offering a day when its golden light
stage dresses the bushes to burnish or

to burn, a handful of clouds adding
their now and then, and under the trees,
pine and olive, a flash of my ashes in

a burlap sack adding to the forest, I
think maybe hold a bit back, maybe
plant some chamisa too, the outskirts

somewhere, more of a nomad, hitch-
hiking the wind, it belongs out here, its
gilded crowns and tarnished copper stalks,

all those dusty months white like gone to
bone, slip now into glory and shine, this
day the sun has buttered out to the edges

BARRY PETERS

Vermeer Construction

Does it really matter
if he used mirrors,
the camera obscura,
any mechanical aid,
as long as the portraits,
cityscapes and interiors
did their work, transporting us

the way I'm transported
driving a country road,
watching a Vermeer 604 Pro
brush a field of hay
in autumnal white light,
the bales glazed like pearl earrings?

CATHERINE MOORE

Until It Thunders

In the rainy season there are two things that take to the road—mudbugs and politicians. They both love to coast along with the new fallen flow. This delighted the boys of Burnt Springs, Alabama, young and grown.

After the passing of Tropical Storm Marjorie, Amos and Fynn were the first young boys to arrive at the dawn-lit flooded road in and off the Burnt. The rains had lasted three nights straight and they knew every mud-loving creature would be casting about, especially in a light drizzle. Fynn had an old Radio-Flyer wagon he floated behind them and Amos pulled along buckets ready to be filled. As they headed down the road, Amos' ma shouted out, "remember it takes a passel of them to make a meal." If they got passels there was good money in selling em for bait, but Amos' ma loved them crawdads and could boil some up alright. Fynn's ma wouldn't cook such a thing, "filthy mudbugs!" She came from highland people and they didn't eat bait like that.

Heading towards a spot right near the levee at the springs, Amos and Fynn saw they were beat out by ole Tigger Brown. He was perched atop an upside down canoe, dated and scarred from draggings. Tigger used a raw chicken neck on a string to fish with a line already dangling in the overflow waters. Sometimes talking to himself, sometimes singing, "You get a line, and I'll get a pole and we'll go down to that crawdad hole, Honey-Baby mine!" He paid the boys no mind other than a brief wave, so the boys set their equipment just slightly farther down the embankment. It wasn't as dry as Tigger's spot but it had the gift of deep shade from a Live Oak tree.

An hour of ole-man singing later, after a brief encounter with a moccasin chasing a near-drowned mouse, and two buckets filled with mudbugs, the boys made out a tall man wading through the water. As he drew closer they could tell it was Hazel Wallace by the L.L. Bean fishing overalls slogging through what was usually Duck Head country. His lanky frame stopped, he surveyed folks on the levee, and pushed his way through the water to Amos and Fynn.

"Morning boys, how's the fishing?" Hazel chose to raise his arm towards the old man as a greeting. Tigger stared back. That was all Hazel expected from Tigger who rarely warmed to other adults. Now, Hazel Wallace spent zero time on children, even his own, and Amos and Fynn looked at each other in hesitation not knowing if they were to answer or not.

“We got us a fine passel, yes sir.” Amos answered for the pair.

“Sir? Well, it seems like your mama raised you right, boy. That’s a blessing, most don’t get blessings like that, ya ought be grateful. Speaking of your mama, is she home right now?”

“Dunno,” Amos said.

“She was about an hour ago,” Fynn said. Amos frowned his direction.

“She ain’t up for company though. She don’t like company this early.”

“Well, you’ve got to respect a woman who keeps proper hours but I’ve got an urgent need. Does she still read leaves?” Hazel asked.

Amos’ shoulders relaxed, “Yeh, she still reads them. She’d be home for that.”

As Hazel turned away Amos added, “tho, she’s raised the price on account of her clairvoyance.”

“It’s a fine woman who knows her worth, keep that in mind, boy,” and Hazel swiped the side of his nose.

“Aint’ that right Tigg?”

Tigger closed one eye in response. It was hard to tell whether it was a wink or a squint. The quiet between them was interrupted by a pack of dogs howling close by.

“Not near enough enforcement of those curs,” Hazel commented to no one in particular and with that he slithered back through the water.

Hazel set the blue and white teacup down between them after his last gulp. Madame Rabun turned the cup gently with her pinky to move the handle towards Hazel. The chirping of her cuckoo-clock echoed from the front parlor.

“Keep your question in mind,” she admonished him. With all her inner-seer she rocked back and forth concentrating upon the cup, she studied it from different angles, until Hazel became impatient and started to clear his throat incessantly.

“Fear not, in this cup good fortune more than outweighs the bad. I see success will crown some venture you are undertaking. But it also seems there will be difficulties pressing upon you in the near future.”

“What do you see?” Hazel asked leaning in for a better look.

“A few tea leaves may form the letter N. But that’s close to a symbol of a serpent, which would be bad luck,” Madame Rabun answered.

Hazel sighed and shook his head. She never lifted her eyes off the teacup.

“These leaves cling to the side so this tells us N seems to be in the future—not far distant perhaps, but not in the present,” she continued as

though she were speaking more to herself. Madame Rabun looked up into his eyes, "You may receive a letter from, or meet, a person whose name begins with N. Or you should guard against an enemy whose name begins with N," she continued.

"I don't make enemies. So that's a definite yes, to my question, then?"

"There are no definites, Mr. Wallace. There are near probabilities, or far away ones. Favorables and unfavorables."

"A favorable read sounds like a yes to me."

"Hmm," Madame Rabun said as she continued to examine the cup, "I see nothing too cautionary."

"Hot damn!" Hazel said and threw his money down on the table.

The county clerk seemed none too pleased to be called in. "Even the bullfrogs stayed home today," she said slamming the election records down on the counter. Hazel's dripping wet coat and his briefcase slicker testified to the clerk's poor opinion of the weather.

"I appreciate your supreme effort in the commission of your duties, ma'am." He gave her an insincere smile and she returned one in kind, then they set to work. On this, the last day to file his candidacy.

* * *

The tropical storm stalled for three more days over the top of north Alabama, sending bands of rain back south in rolling squalls. Despite the rainy weather, word still got around the Burnt and within half a week there was no other talk in Filmer's barbershop other than Hazel Wallace's bid for sheriff. This was unusual; there wasn't a lot of political talk since everyone already felt the same way about most things, but this turn of events divided the Burnt into varying degrees of worry and excitement. There were also the folks who missed football season and sought out arguments as their means of remaining fanatical.

"That ol' Boone better take his new opponent seriously because Hazel's got the goods to beat him," said the aproned guy with the enthusiasm of a sports commentator. He swept the floor faster as he spoke. The youngster in a Braves ball cap gave him a thumbs-up.

"Welp, I spent a decade tetching that sheriff's office to give the Frogeye Saloon a wide berth," said the man fighting the folds of his newspaper. "I ain't fond of the idea of breaking in another."

"Might have'ta." Braves cap said.

“Nope,” said a tall thin man leaning in the back corner. He had offered Tigger, and a few others, his chair in line as if he aimed to spend some time here.

“You don’t suppose that Hazel’s family has something to do with this new political bug of his?” asked Mayor Johnson who had finished his haircut about an hour ago and was still working the room.

“T’wouldn’t surprise me none,” the old man currently in the barber’s chair said.

“If so, this is only a stepping stone on his way to something bigger. Always wanted to follow in his daddy’s footsteps and become one of those state boys,” Johnson said.

“Welp, sure hope it don’t happen, though.”

“Nope,” the tall man said again, “he’s got no platform.”

“What do ya mean by that Fletch?” asked Johnson.

“I mean law and order ain’t good enough. Every mangy stray barks up that tree. Hazel needs to be talking—three strikes you’re out, jail expansion, work details.”

“Chain gang anyone?” the mayor says to the room, adding an imaginary mallet swing to get a general laugh.

“T’will need lots of money to run against the Boone machinery, don’t you know he’ll be heading down this way for money,” the old man said in resentment, “Hazel may have been born here, but now he’s off the Burnt.”

“I reckon,” Filmer said placing a hand on the man’s shoulder to steady his client.

“What do ya think there, Tigger?” Mayor Johnson asked sauntering to the back chair.

“Better still and thought a fool, than speak and remove all doubt.” Tigger replied.

* * *

The day of the campaign kick-off began clear skied and Hazel’s crew made quick work of setting up the event in a clearing by the one treeless hill near the Burnt. Crew meant Hazel’s wife, Georgina, a couple of his students from Chiggersville Community College, and Hazel’s longtime local buddy, Eldred Hagan, who had assembled an impromptu stage. It was comprised of two flatbed trucks rear to rear with each other in front of a clump of blackhaws. The writing on the side of the farm trucks was covered over with a long red and white banner reading, ‘NATIVE SON—will do Right by Badge & Gun.’

“Looks dadgum perfect, man,” Hazel said as he shook Eldred’s hand, “thanks for coming out early today and gittin’ it done.”

Eldred shrugged off the gratitude, “almost as dadgum perfect as you,” he said flicking at the flag pin on the lapel of Hazel’s houndstooth jacket.

“Haven’t we cleaned up to be respectable sorts?” Hazel drew a cigar out of his pocket and Eldred took the offering and lit it up. They stood smoking, watching the crew, and catching up on gossip.

Georgina busied herself in directing the caterer setting out tables and heaping platters of southern fare. Her lithe figure leaped between organizing the students in streamer hanging and chasing down her toddler. When the tables were set, she added a couple of flower arrangements—red and white carnations in old ammo boxes with the state flag painted on.

Hazel liked the looks of it all until the bright blue station wagon of Georgina’s nephew drove up the road into the Burnt. It was a sad late-model vehicle that only teenagers and artists would drive, a magnet on the hood advertised ‘Bugger’s Band.’

“What the hell happened to the DJ?” Hazel said, then yelled to his wife, “Honey! How am I supposed to walk out to Sweet Home Alabama without a DJ?”

“Do you know how much it would cost to play that song?” She called back while walking towards him to pacify the situation. “Hundreds of dollars, Hazel.”

“Couldn’t figure out how to get electricity out here. Not a drop line in the county long enough,” Eldred said apologizing.

“What’s wrong with Bugger’s Band? They came in second place in the Bama’s Got Talent competition. They’re really good Hazel,” Georgina said. “Heading to Muscle Shoals next month to record too,” she added.

Hazel looked her straight in the eye without answering, lit up the cigar again, and walked off into the Burnt.

“You know those Skynyrd boys ain’t even from Alabama...” Georgina began moving towards Hazel but Eldred caught her eye and shook his head.

People gathered shortly before noon—the Burnt’s freshly scrubbed moved among the gaunt and gracelorn, some who were probably losing wages by attending. Children ran madly about between the corn-fed brethren. Some folks were clapping to the music, a few dancing, and others standing, arms folded, heckling those who moved. ‘Like a small town working at the task of amusing itself,’ Georgina thought. She tapped Hazel’s shoulder and pointed back along the tree line, where Hazel made out a small group of swamp revenants with pasty complexions.

There was a quiet encampment of meth makers here in the Burnt. Remnants of their scorched-out trailer shells dotted the roadway. Hazel aimed to shut them down but this would not be a topic in his speech today, because these Redneck Crystal trades-people came from a long line of bootleggers—families who had enterprised outside the law for generations. And while the Burnt wanted the likes of meth labs out of the neighborhood, old instincts held in keeping quiet about family. Even when the family included folks you weren't related to. Even for folks you didn't even care to know, like those shadow people.

Bugger's Band was just finishing up when a wave of dark clouds rolled in and the air thickened. Between songs, the sound of barking dogs echoed out of the Burnt. As the musicians changed instruments for the finale there came an outburst somewhat wilder than hound dogs. The banjo player solo'ed a few chords then the rest of the quartet joined in a rousing version of Dixie and Bugger nodded to Hazel that this was his walk-on song.

'My lord,' Hazel thought as he climbed the ladder and straddled over the side of the truck to pick up the awaiting megaphone.

There was a soft chuckle from the aldermen who had grouped themselves as they did at Filmer's barbershop.

"Welp, if this isn't 1940 all over again, I don't know what is."

"I kind of like it," the oldest man said.

Hazel tested the button on the megaphone, "Afternoon y'all." The women smiled or waved, a few men gave him the thumbs up.

"Looks like that ole coyote Sheriff Boone has ordered up the weather for us today," Hazel began, which drew the expected boos from the crowd. "But it don't matter cuz we've seen worse around here. And we know how to swim." They cheered.

Again, rose the eerie sounds of canine howls.

"But how can we feel safe when the hounds of hell aren't held at bay? Are we suppos'd to let our children play free with a pack of wild dogs loose in the Burnt? Can our womenfolk walk safely outside when coyotes prowl?" Hazel walked to the edge of the truck bed with his hand outstretched to an elderly woman.

"M'am, do you feel safe?" Hazel asked and she shook her head in reply.

"I know a time when you did feel safe. I know a time when no house in Burnt Springs had a lock on the door. I'm the native son who knows."

The crowd clapped and a few girls who had thought to bring their pom-poms shook them in the air. A wind sweeping down from the trees lifted the campaign banner in furl. It blew over a centerpiece and a pile of Chinets

plates off the table. The men looked to the sky, then around, concerned. "He'll stay until it thunders," Fletch said with confidence.

"You know you want to feel safe again. I know we need to take back the law from those over in Montgomery who think they know better than us. And we need to take back civil order from a man who can't even keep his own wife on the straight and narrow." A round of amens erupted from the crowd.

"They ain't doing right by us. I'm the native son who will do right by the badge and gun. I'm the native son who will take it back for you." Hazel swiped the side of his nose. "Take it back I say."

"Take back the Burnt!" someone in the crowd shouted. They all began to chant, "take back the Burnt, take back the Burnt!" Hazel pumped his fists and joined with the rally call. The sky lit up as if in response, then it rumbled across the crowd, and came down in a shout of rain.

A wet dog bobbed under the front porch of the Slapout Mercantile sniffing for peach pits as the men milled around eating the available fruit. At Georgina's lead, the women had grabbed the platters of fried chicken and ran into the cover of the woods, where they were feeding the children. The rain tapered to a lighter drizzle but showed no sign of stopping.

"That was beautiful!" Fletch grabbed Hazel's hand for a shake that took an entire arm's movement.

"Thanks. Fletcher?"

"Yours truly. I just go by Fletch, and if you need someone to help work on your campaign platform, I'm your man."

"Platform?"

"Yup, details. Boone will come at you with some popular programs he's got working for him, like the Sheriff sponsored rides to after-school football camps." Fletcher signaled a moment's wait to a woman with three wet children clinging to her hovering under a tree canopy.

"That stump-speeching style of yours is solid gold, but you've got to have a list of ideas to counter him with," Fletcher finished. Hazel nodded in return.

"What this town needs is a lunch counter," Hazel said half-serious.

"Well, maybe you can decree that when you're Sheriff. Though, you'd need a real cook to run such a place."

"There's Joyce Ann, but I guess since the town's best cook is busy teaching school we'll never see that happen."

"We will see," Fletch said and looked past Hazel to the way off the Burnt. "You know that place on Highway 20?"

“Jimbo’s Barbeque?”

Fletch nodded, “Let’s meet there tomorrow afternoon and hash this over. I have a matter I need to speak at you with some degree of privacy.”

* * *

Fletcher Norris had never been a friend or an ally in the past. They’d spent their high school days ten feet from each other at the hallway lockers and never had even a word passed between them. Hazel was captain of the football team and puny Fletch spent most his time in the science lab. His intelligence held some appeal, but mostly Hazel didn’t understand the line of Fletch’s thinking. Like at this moment, watching Fletch strain the tea bag after a lengthy dance of to and fro, swishing the bag across the mug. Hazel found the way he squeezed the tea tag, a little aggressive, interesting. If he wasn’t careful the bag would be liable to tear and those tiny leaves would puddle their way to the bottom.

Hazel Wallace remembered the fortune teller’s words—he would meet someone with a name beginning with the letter N. And here Fletcher Norris was out of the blue. Out of the damn blue and still slap dab in the middle of the Burnt. Madame Rabun’s prediction was true. Hazel’s leg bounced restlessly with anticipation. It was fate’s hand that pushed Fletch into his path and Hazel would pay the man closer attention.

“Fletch, I want to thank you for coming to the kick-off rally. Ours looks to be a promising friendship.”

“I’m happy to support your candidacy. Someday I’ll get to say I knew Hazel Wallace back when.”

“Back when he thought law and order would win an election,” Hazel joked.

“Exactly,” Fletcher said lining up the condiment bottles between them.

“I get what you’re saying and appreciate the advice.”

“We’re like-minded then,” Fletch said almost as a question, punctuated with a squeeze of Jimbo’s white hot barbeque sauce on a sandwich, then passed the bottle to Hazel.

“As long as you can understand I ain’t looking to run a redneck campaign,” Hazel said.

Fletcher ate slow and nodded to indicate his readiness to listen.

“Everyone knows I was born and raised in Burnt country, unlike Boone. This county is full of high-minded hardworking folks. Good country people, not like the belly-scratchers that Boone appeals to. I’ve got an advanced law degree and my campaign needs to reflect...” Hazel tapped his finger on the table while composing his next words.

“Your social status?” Fletcher supplied.

“As Georgina puts it, yes, status. And I wish ta hell that Bugger hadn’t played Dixie at the kick-off, that’s exactly what we’re trying to avoid here. You understand Fletch?”

“Yup, makes sense, Hazel. Take the high road and all that. Besides, the county’s already got a redneck candidate in that sonfabitch Sheriff. I think they’re looking for something else.”

“And that’s the something I’m aiming for.” Hazel added more hot sauce to his sandwich.

Fletcher cleared his throat twice before speaking again, “As long you don’t come off as a choir boy Hazel, I’m on-board.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning perception is everything. If you appear soft no one will believe you’re tough on crime. This campaign needs to reflect a certain hardline. Trust me,” Fletcher said while looking out the window, “Too good or godly and you won’t ever be taken seriously.”

Surrounded by dusty light suspended in the sunray across the table, Hazel had a vague recollection of Norris as a teenager singing in the church choir. He reached through the beam and shook Fletcher’s hand.

Hazel began surveying the dining crowd. It seemed like the usual late afternoon mix—retirees on their travels to Chiggersville for medical appointments and a road crew made up of mostly Mexicans who had worked through the traditional lunch to stop at the heat of the day. Hazel made a point at acknowledging all of them.

“What was the matter you wanted to talk about?” Hazel asked.

“Colonel Johnson says he wants to retire from the school board.”

“Really? I haven’t heard of this. How did you catch wind?”

“I have my sources,” Fletch said glibly then catching Hazel’s incredulous eye he added, “my wife Emmalee cleans his house every week. They’ve become chummy over the past year.”

Hazel stroked his goatee and nodded. He knew Fletch’s eyes were odd, now he noticed they wouldn’t fix. They moved independently of each other, the right one slightly in advance of the left.

“Seems the ole man doesn’t always have the best of days. Seems the gout and the emphysema are finally getting to him. That’s mostly why we don’t see him around the Burnt anymore—and good riddance because he’s still as opinionated an ole pissant as ever. After six months of his complaints about not being able to get to the school board meetings due to health, and of his deteriorating health due to the cantankerous meetings, Emmalee mentioned to him that I’d be willing to serve on the board in his stead. He

seems agreeable to the idea. None of this is official, of course, that would take an appointment from the County Clerk administration.”

“And I guess that’s where I come in,” Hazel said, still stroking his goatee.

“It did occur to me that with your granddaddy having sat pretty in the District Attorney’s office for all those years, you might know a few more of those government folks than I do.”

Hazel could not tell if Fletch was being sarcastic or simply jealous.

“Where does that leave us? I mean, what exactly are you asking Fletch?”

“I help you clinch this election and you find a way for the county to appointment me in the Colonel’s stead.”

“Why not wait for the Colonel to tender his resignation and then run for the board yourself?”

“Because I’ll never get elected as I’ve come out publicly in favor of closing down the school.”

“Wait, you want on the school board and you want the school closed?”

“Yep, and hopefully even though you had trouble figuring out platforms, you can see the problem here.”

“Yeh, that dog don’t hunt, Fletch. Why would you want to serve on the damn board?”

“What better way of seeing it all ends how I want?” Fletcher froze as if that would still his floating eye. It was an effort that created direct eye contact with Hazel.

They sat measuring each other between bites as they finished their meals. Fletcher stacking the greasy food baskets as they were emptied and Hazel tossing brief finger waves to fellow diners. Both men began to understand how they could be a means for the other.

By his own suggestion, Fletch left first and Hazel waited a spell before leaving. He signaled the waitress to top off his tea and felt as if being watched. Hazel noticed Tigger Brown sitting just outside the front windows where the DeWayne Rural Area Transport van picked up passengers. After paying out he made a point to walk past the bench where Tigger sat in the sun, squinting one-eyed at a farmer’s almanac on his lap.

“Waiting on the DRATS?” Hazel asked conversationally.

“Why you want anything to do with that bottom dweller?” Tigger asked as he looked up from the open book shaking his head.

“Fletch, oh, he’s alright.”

“Like a crawdad he is — after he’s got the pinch on you, won’t let go until it thunders,” Tigger said before returning to the forecasts.

When Hazel slid into his old Jeep Cherokee, he flipped through the notepad in a holder affixed to the dash until he found the right page. At the bottom of neatly crossed-off names, he wrote ‘T. —Tigger— Brown.’ He started up the car, fiddled the air vents toward himself, and then sat watching the old man dodder his way on to the rural transit van. He remained rooted in thought until the DRATS disappeared down Highway 20. He reached for the pen again and jotted the name ‘Fletcher Norris’ before driving off.

DIANA PINCKNEY

Two Comedians, 1965

after Edward Hopper

His last work. Straight from the *Commedia dell'arte*.
Painted as a pair of mimes, Hopper's portrayal

of himself and his artist wife. Elegant in creamy
costumes and chalk faces above ruffled collars,

Edward and Josephine bend slight bodies to us.
Creating their own light, they glow at the edge

of a stark stage. His curved harlequin's hat is black
above dark eyes. While she is bound in a skull-cap, white

and round as the moon. Is their rivalry softened
by a new dependence that comes with age, he finally

granting her the grace she brought to decades together.
Their era of Punch and Judy muted now, transformed

into these fragile clowns who dress as the lovers,
Pierrot and Pierrette. Hopper holds Josephine's gloved

hand in his. Their free hands gesture toward each other
as if giving permission to pick up the brush once more.

Still, the theatre looms. The backdrop cavernous.
A curtain of green foliage sways, poised to close.

PHILL PROVANCE

Of Beauty & Things

for my son, Ledger, with all my affection

These things need saving:
bleary carnival lights streaked across a Saturday night,

the schmutz on vinyl siding
on dingy, little intersection homes,
the filmy air sliding
between the eye and an American flag
or church when these things
are not seen on postcards or screens.

The taste of too much grease on your tongue
after eating funnel cake and deep-fried Oreos,
and the smooth, tanned legs
the girls-you-know show from cut-offs
with their inside pockets dangling loose
beneath the fringe.

The rattle of rust-rotted shocks
when the kids peel out of Taco Bell,
and the glow always over
the cornfields, always some
orgiastic rattle on the breeze.

Please, God, if this all must go,
sure, let us save every perfect thing,
every As Seen On TV thing,
but also may we save
a few small, imperfect things,
some breath from actual throats?

Let me, for instance,
save the stench of gasoline and musty
pissed-on clothes at a laundromat without AC or heat,
save a single pillar of factory smoke,

a stray tin can from the garbage
along the road, and just a smidge of that brackish, mushy shit
that lays on fresh-plowed snow.

Save how my father inflates up his upper lip when thinking,
how my mother looks like a goose
with her weak chin and hooked nose
and how my brother's crow's feet cinch
like drawstring bags when he
is about to tell a dirty joke.

But save above all
my baby's puffy cheeks,
how he laughs with both eyes closed

APARNA SANYAL

Hopeful

Maybe the time is coming
for sunshine.
Finally — after many mordantly lush, tenebrous
landscapes.
Longing and wilful forgetting,
and nights
of cat's cradles and silvered webs.
The nature of linearity is alien.
Where will I find it?
I will look in my forgotten cupboard
of simple choices.
And perhaps, the sunlight will
show me the new formed mirror of clarity,
the tiger stripes in the
lantana bushes —
the perfection,
that is simplicity.

JOYCE SCHMID

How My Father Got to Watch Me Grow Up

He was a musician, twenty-four,
in glasses, uniform, and gun,
as though he were a soldier—
bugling reveille, saluting, marching,
brave, he was a five foot six MP
who tossed his rifle to the German prisoners,
then vaulted up and sat beside them
in the transport truck, he was a depot guard
who flinched the time he had to crack
his billy club,

who after playing taps,
would play his violin or trumpet
for the officers at mess, and feel his fear
dissolve in cadences and rhythms
and the clinks of plates, the peaceful sight
of men and women dancing, oh, he played,
remembering long afternoons of scales
and sharps and flats when he was young
and didn't know some day an officer
who heard him play

would summon him
into his office and would ask,
*You think you're ready
to go overseas?*
and when my father paled,
would laugh and find my father's
papers in among the stack
intended for the Battle of the Bulge,
would separate them out,
and wink.

RAY MORRISON

No One's Ghost But My Own

My wife calls my name, startling me awake. I dig the heels of my hands against my eyeballs to rub out the burning and, truth be told, to delay the awkward conversation I know is about to ensue. As I open my eyes and look at her—toward her, I guess is more accurate—my eyes focus on the indistinct shape of the dresser behind her, blurred by the translucence of her body. She wants to buy a new dress, she tells me, and needs me to order it for her online. I remind her—for the umpteenth time—dead women don't need dresses, new or otherwise.

It's not like Franci doesn't know she's dead. She has been gone for just over a year now, although her visits began only in the past month. I was terrified at first. I'd jolt awake to see her suspended a foot off the floor and I'd scream, lying awake with the lights on the rest of the night as she kept trying to get me to acknowledge her until she got tired or frustrated enough by my pretending she wasn't there to dissolve away to nothing. Those first half-dozen times I convinced myself I was hallucinating, that these visions of my dead wife were merely manifestations of deep-seated, unresolvable marital conflicts my mind and heart struggled to settle while I slept. But after so many visits I've come to accept it really is her ghost. And now, every night, she comes begging me to open up my laptop and order her a dress.

"And why do you need a new dress if you're dead?" I ask yet again, my voice betraying sleep-deprived irritation at this exasperating routine we've developed.

Franci looks down, embarrassed.

Only now does it occur to me that this must be weird for her, too. Her form starts to shimmer and flicker, reminding me of the crew from the Star Trek TV shows when they were transporting down to a planet. I can barely make out that Franci is picking at a spot on an invisible fingernail.

"Listen," I say, "I'm not saying I won't buy you the dress; it just seems like something you wouldn't really need, you know, now."

Franci looks up then, still hovering next to the bed—the same bed she and I made love on countless times and in which we conceived our son, Danny—and the odd sparkling stops.

"Don't you think that dead girls like to look pretty, too?" she asks.

She glides away then, passing straight through the bedroom wall. I stare at the spot, waiting for her to reemerge, but she doesn't. I glance at my

clock and see it is three hours before the alarm will go off. Since it's obvious I won't be able to go back to sleep, I slide out of bed, figuring I'll go down to the kitchen and make some coffee. When I'm halfway down the stairs, I notice Franci floating in the living room, her back to me. She appears to be staring at the photographs lined along the mantelshelf above the fireplace.

I walk over and stand next to my wife's ghost and look at the pictures with her. In the center is one of the three of us taken at Danny's college graduation less than two years ago, not long before Franci's diagnosis. The picture directly in front of me, the oldest of the photographs, is from our wedding day. The two of us look almost unrecognizable, so young and vital. Franci is dazzling in her white gown, grinning that smile that never failed, in thirty years, to make me feel like the luckiest man alive. In the photo, I'm standing a little behind her, awkward in my tuxedo, squinting at the camera with a slightly dazed expression, a mix of naiveté and cockiness and thinking I was ready to take on all that life would toss at us.

"I wish I looked like that again," Franci says, and I see that she's watching me as I study the photo.

"You always will," I say. "You never stopped looking that pretty. Not once. I just didn't tell you that enough."

Franci reaches out to pick up the photo from Danny's graduation but her hand wafts right through it. I lift it up for her and hold it so we both can see. A question bursts into my mind just then and I wonder why it hadn't occurred to me sooner.

"Have you visited Danny, too?"

She looks at me, her expression neutral, unreadable. "Not yet, honey. I will when I think he's ready. For now, I'm no one's ghost but your own."

Her answer feels like a soft punch to my heart. I recall instantly the time I asked Franci out on our first date. We'd started graduate school together. I noticed her right away at orientation, but I convinced myself she was too beautiful to consider dating someone like me. Yet I somehow screwed up the nerve to ask anyway and, to my surprise, she said yes. Even after three or four dates, I was still certain I was only someone for her to hang out with until Mr. Right came along. I vividly recall lying to her one night as we sat on the lumpy couch in my tiny apartment, telling her I'd be okay if she wanted to date other guys. Franci punched me on the shoulder—not hard—and pulled my face close to hers, saying, "I am no one's girl but your own." I found her odd way of phrasing her words unique and charming, and I never forgot it.

Then this memory is followed rapidly by others: Franci burning three consecutive batches of cookies she was baking for Danny's kindergarten

class, setting off the smoke alarm in two rooms; remembering how she cried for two days when our pet guinea pig died; how she got drunk one night and insisted on putting polish on my toenails and wouldn't take no for an answer; remembering a string of silly things about her I'd thought I'd forgotten—wearing my underwear on her head, the awful Elvis impersonation she did every time she had a couple drinks, and, especially, her obsession with buying new dresses.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Franci says, pulling me out of my reverie. She sails up through the living room ceiling and disappears.

"Goodnight, darling," I say to the empty room, and I feel tears on my face.

I'm tired now, so I skip the coffee and plod back upstairs to try and sleep for an hour or so before I have to get up for work. I stop in Danny's old bedroom, which I've converted to a home office, and collect my laptop to leave on my bedside table for Franci's next visit.

Lying in bed, drowsy, my thoughts fixate on Franci and dresses. I find myself hoping she'll pick a green one, my favorite color on her. But if she decides on white, that'll be just fine. And, I wonder, will she even be able to wear it if I order it? Then a disturbing thought occurs to me: Will Franci leave me alone again once she's gotten from me what she's asking for? And I realize it's this that haunts me most of all.

LAURA SCHULKIND

The Workshop

Somewhere, outside, beyond the long narrow tables, and
pitchers of ice water, and chandeliers and heavy double doors,
her voice rising and falling, telling us to be aware of our breath,
I think a school of dolphins is passing by, and I breathe,
and notice a dull ache for the first time in my lower jaw and
wonder if bone cancer feels the same as a cavity,
until her voice pulls me back into the windowless room,
where she is saying, imagine if on the day you were born,
you were given a car, and told it is the only car you will ever have,
imagine how well you would care for that car, and
I understand her point as I listen to the practiced serenity of her voice,
look at her lithe, well-cared for body, and shift in my seat,
feeling the weight of my body hold me to the chair,
and she tells us to close our eyes, a hundred people with our eyes closed,
which, oddly, makes me feel watched and self-conscious,
as if she had asked us to undress or tell a secret, and
I wonder whether I am holding my breath, and think about wind,
and how it makes white caps on the waves just out of sight, and
she tells us time is divided into focus and distraction, and
she tells us about listening, and I try to hear the ocean
through the heavy doors, and she gives us all egg timers
and divides us into groups of three, and tells us to take turns talking,
three minutes each, while the others must listen
without interruption or interjection,
without relating or adding or comparing, and it is a good idea,
except that instead of listening, I am thinking about what I will say
when it is my turn, wonder if I should mention the dolphins.

CLAIRE SCOTT

Unexcused Absence

Monday morning and you are not here.
Another "F" joins the parade
of "F's" across Miss Nichols' notebook.
You are off catching pollywogs
in the stream behind the school,
sneaking into matinees, sitting
next to men with bourbon breath.

Once I joined you.
Our hands touched by chance
in the dark theater of Audrey
Hepburn and Gary Cooper.
Sparks shot up my arm.
I didn't wash for weeks,
savoring the scent of your skin.

Monday morning and you are not here
in Charles River Church.
I circled the notice in the newspaper,
learned your heart was weak.
Strangers are speaking of you:
good Father, loving husband,
generous friend.

I drift away.
My hand touches yours
and we are twelve again,
skipping school, watching
Love in the Afternoon.

MAUREEN SHERBONDY

Transitions

I never learned them either. Thoughts ricochet
from ceiling to floor, from grocery lists
to doctor appointments. My mother skips
from conversation about atrial fibrillation
to the Atlantic City bus trip in a microsecond.
Maybe the sudden departure from Germany to America
was to blame for her inability to use them.

In my home state of New Jersey, no signals
are used when shifting from lane to lane;
letting drivers know the plan only leads to cut-offs
and brake-slamming. And did you hear about
the Vegas shooter? No lovely transition to the other side
exists for bullet-in-the head sudden ends. They were
listening to music one moment, dead the next.

Men in my family die suddenly,
no chance for hospice care or slow final days
for last good-byes. My father flat-lined
in a second when his heart stopped.
My grandfather's artery burst; he flew
away without a departing utterance.

In school my English teacher discussed building
bridges between paragraphs. I was home with bronchitis.
Life is not seamless. Like bad carnival rides, subjects
jerk from one track to the next. Even my own birth
jumped the transition phase, labor proceeding directly to pushing.

My father left abruptly without a sit-down with us
children; divorce came like a tornado, arriving without warning.
I would have made a terrible deejay, no common chords
between tunes, spinning Talking Heads then Air Supply.
Put words on a wall, hope they stick. I am trying to make sense
of a world that throws rocks without a signal phrase or a single warning.

DUNCAN SMITH

New Ground

Dad auctioned off the John Deere 8400
along with attachments.
No more 2000 acre bets
against an early frost.
Too much rain or too little too late.
The fluctuating future of soybeans.

His rebuilt Farmall chugs across a garden plot
gone from boyhood chore to old man's calling.
He plucks cabbage worms and bean beetles
from leaf and stem.
Hauls truck beds of produce
to the market at the mall.

I plough fields different from the ones my father knew.
He follows seed to vine-ripe Best Boy
nesting in a young mom's palm
while I set out words
in short, neat rows.

KERRI VINSON SNELL

Brittle Creek

Perhaps like me you've studied Brittle Creek
and perhaps you've seen where the water
thickens like a large man's gulp
and drops into the rocks like working sleep.

I swear you can see watery, gloved hands
jiggling fingers in five different directions
under the poplar bridge near Old Town.
You can smell the immaculate blue air
of no industry where nocturnal animals
are not afraid to move about in day.

Follow the clay indents of odd shoes
traipsing from the beginning of the bridge
to a thinner slice of water, where all the locals
know the true crossing should be. On Sundays,
immerse within the swaths of bug-bitten oxygen
moving from invisible places of death
into the open windows of white churches—
there is no sense to it. Faith

and death go hand in hand like lovers and it's as though
those window-songs are summoning
black tumors, explosions of natural gas,
disc blades thrust into accidental backs.

Or drunken teenagers, sometimes drunken
only on the brook's clear water forgetting
to look at highway's intersection, forgetting
to steady the saddle-less horse. I remember
these things and the life I once lived.
The tremulous, etching sounds of water.
Shirtless body that is life. Faith,
you weren't my first kiss.

OLAF KRONEMAN

Fighting to Heal

I recognized the 55-year-old black man in my office as one of the best professional Detroit boxers since Joe Louis or Tommy Hearn. He'd been a contender. Now he was sick. I'd been an amateur boxer and felt the bond. I wanted to help him.

"I've heard of you. You were famous," I said.

"Back in the day," he told me.

"I follow boxing. I fought in the Detroit Golden Gloves tournament in 1968," I said. As a 65-year-old white guy from the 'burbs, I tried to establish common ground.

"Right after the riots?" he asked. "Why?"

"I wanted to understand why the races couldn't get along," I said. "Muhammad Ali was my hero. He spoke the truth to authority."

"And paid the price."

"Unfortunately," I said. "But he never sank low enough to hate."

"Boxing can cure hate," he said. "Were you any good?"

"Not bad for a white guy," I said.

He smiled and removed an old black-and-white photograph from his wallet. It showed him taking a fighting pose in front of the Twenty Grand in Las Vegas. He shared the marquee with The Dramatics.

To see the image of The Dramatics on the marquee caused me to pause.

"They were at the Algiers in downtown Detroit the night those kids were murdered."

"My uncle was there too. He escaped, hid out in Reverend Franklin's church, Aretha's dad. Police were looking for him."

"Why?" I asked.

"Don't know. Cops back then were bad news. They'd ride in Buick Roadmasters, four of them; only one in uniform and they'd stop and clobber you for nothing. The 'Big Four' used rubber hoses."

"The movie *Detroit* is about the Algiers."

"Same old shuck and jive. I don't want to see a story by a white director," he said. "Should be Spike Lee, somebody who knows."

Turning back to his medical condition, I told him his kidneys were failing and soon he'd need dialysis. He didn't flinch, accepting the verdict

as if he'd just lost to a hometown decision. The big money didn't want him to win.

"Doc, I don't want to go on the machine. What about a new kidney?"

"It's difficult to go directly to a kidney transplant," I said. "There's a long waiting list."

"Damn," he said. "I've seen too many brothers decline on dialysis."

I nodded. "Black people have a four times higher incidence of kidney failure than Caucasians."

"How come?"

"Genetic, environmental." Then I said, "There is another option that could help. If you are willing to take a kidney that is not the best quality, an extended donor kidney, you may be able to avoid dialysis."

"What do you mean?"

"An extended donor kidney is a kidney that may not work. It's a risk, but there are more available."

"If it works, I avoid dialysis?"

"Yes."

"Every time I stepped into the ring, I took a risk. I fought Earnie Shavers. He could kill you with either hand. This is no different," he said. "Doc, what would you do?"

"I'd rather take a chance with an extended donor kidney than fight Earnie Shavers."

"You're not experimenting?" he asked.

The idea of medical experiments brought to mind the racist Tuskegee syphilis study that ended in 1973, the year I entered medical school. The same professors who interviewed me and evaluated my fitness to become a physician did not protest. Shame on them.

The first physician who did protest was Dr. Irwin Schatz of Detroit's Henry Ford Hospital. He complained to the Public Health Service, who never replied. Shame on them.

"No, this is not an experiment," I said.

"I trust you."

I placed him in the hands of the transplant team. Three months later he received a kidney. It worked. When he returned to my clinic, he was fit. He'd gained twenty pounds, his health robust.

"Doc, I never knew how bad I felt," he said. "Funny, the kidney was from a white man. We're all the same on the inside where you can't see color. It's too dark in there."

"We have interchangeable parts. Now we need interchangeable hearts," I said.

"I've been blessed. I'm going to give back," he said. "I'll open a gym. Get the kids off the street. Teach them to box. Girls too."

"Do you think women should box?"

"Absolutely."

"Good luck," I said. "I'd be willing to donate money."

"Don't need money. I need a doctor for tournaments."

"A doctor as in me?"

"I'd appreciate it."

I was uneasy. My Christian Danish liberal background and patient advocacy often got me in trouble. I could feel it coming again. I was also concerned about liability. What if someone was hurt during a tournament? As a doctor who took an oath to do no harm, was it too dangerous for me to promote?

I learned that amateur boxing ranked as the twenty-third most dangerous contact sport. Not surprisingly, football and hockey were more dangerous, but I learned that soccer, basketball, lacrosse, track and field, wrestling, and competitive swimming and diving had more reported injuries. Still, as the late great Michigan State football coach Duffy Daugherty pointed out, "Dancing is a contact sport; football is a collision sport."

I believed amateur boxing lay in between. Still I took out a separate liability policy. I was also concerned about venturing into black neighborhoods that might not welcome me. Then I realized that an operating room wasn't always safe. I'd put his life at risk, especially with a marginal kidney. He trusted me in a medical world that many minorities viewed with suspicion. I would trust him in his world. There was a common humanity shared by a doctor and a patient, not to mention a couple of former boxers. I agreed to help him with his tournament.

At the beginning of the boxing tournament, the audience was asked to stand, put their hand over their heart, and sing our National Anthem. I was curious what the primarily black audience would do. Colin Kaepernick had just started taking a knee.

The entire audience stood and sang "The Star-Spangled Banner," a cappella. It seemed the fight fans understood Colin was no Muhammad Ali. It wasn't about the sentiment, which was valid, but more about the sacrifice.

In the bout, two ten-year-old boys wore headgear and fourteen-ounce gloves. They boxed for one minute with a one-minute rest in between. Their form was excellent. They had been well coached, their punches abridged and made safe by the equipment. It was more like fencing than a brutal boxing match. When it was over the crowd applauded. Each boxer went to the four sides of the ring, stamped their feet, and bowed. The headgear was removed revealing proud smiles.

“Okay, check them out,” the ref said.

I examined the boxers. They were fine.

The fighters became older, in heavier divisions, in sixteen-ounce gloves with more authority in their punches. When a blow of any consequence landed, the fight was stopped, the fighter given an eight count and examined. In amateur boxing things were kept very safe: as they should be. Ten vigilant people at ringside could stop a match at any time. The doctor’s decision trumped the other nine.

Females in the ring wore headgear with a faceguard and large gloves. They were ring savvy. A sexual predator would have his hands full if he tried messing with them. With a daughter and three granddaughters, I’d been opposed to women boxing. No longer. I’m taking them to the boxing gym.

The tournament was a success. My patient thanked me and offered a stipend. I declined and told him to give it to the gym to help the kids out. He brought me a gift: an oversized navy-blue beret.

“This is the same kind that Jack Johnson wore in 1909,” he said. “You’ll be fly for a white guy.”

I put it on. I didn’t look “fly,” more like Gene Wilder in *Silver Streak*.

I refuse to accept that progress hasn’t been made against racism. In 1999, each victim of the Tuskegee syphilis study received \$37,000 from the federal government and an apology from President Clinton. They should have been paid a lot more. Obama was elected twice.

From 1894 to 1968, 3,446 blacks and 1,297 whites were lynched. We didn’t know their names. Today we know Rodney King, Reginald Denny, Trayvon Martin, Eric Gardner, Sean Bell, and the film *Detroit* added Cooper, Pollard, and Temple. Knowing their names is to share their humanity.

Obviously, we still have a long way to go.

The recent turmoil in Charlottesville broke my heart just like the troubles of Detroit did fifty years ago. Sadly I watched the candlelight vigil for Heather Heyer at the University of Virginia. I was a medical resident at UVA from 1978–81. My memory was of a fine school with a wonderful residency program. The atmosphere contained the living spirit of Thomas Jefferson with a dash of Edgar Allan Poe. The school was, and is, governed by an honor code.

I saw no honor in the barbarism of August.

I still volunteer as a fight doctor in Detroit and now Pontiac and Flint. My patient is doing very well and continues to mentor young boxing talent. We are united and continue fighting to heal.

LEROY SORENSON

The Tear Down

A man stumbles out of his car,
sunglasses in one hand, ready
to fight off the wind. He surveys
brown fields, bends into the wind
as if bowing before an altar.

The sky a blur of washed blue.
He steps onto gravel, studies an
abandoned tractor, its seat rusted;
a tractor like the one he sat
on as a boy. There is nothing left
of the house, the artesian well,
the barn. Everything torn down

for more crops. His hands still itch
from the stiff wool of a lamb's head;
his tongue still savors the onion-filled
hamburgers of his youth. A ten-building
town a half mile away. The town
with a shotgun country joint, gleaming
oak bar. The town where he learned pool

on tiptoes. The bar where he began
to learn the language of men:
the grunts, the turn-of-the-knife insults,
the endless will to humiliate and win.
An abandoned mortuary sat a few doors
down, a rotted place where William and Mary
and Anne, his grandmother's children,

all lay before the age of five. He thinks
about a grandfather he never knew buried
a hundred miles away and his aunt
shriveled with longing for the return

of her dead fiancé. His mother
and her dead son. This is the farm
where he learned the never-ending
price of love. These memories
razor-sharp in his throat.

MATTHEW J. SPIRENG

Blame It on the Rain

a spirit scared me half-to-death
forecasting I'd be killed
by rain.

—Richard Hugo, “Graves in Queens”

Remember the soft mist that warm spring
morning. It seemed almost a blessing as it
touched your skin, the hairs on your arms
covered by finest dew. Even a downpour

can be refreshing on a hot summer day.
It's so innocent, water. Necessary. One
could go out in the rain, throw one's arms
wide and look up to the sky, the softest

water falling on one's determined face. Who'd
have thought it would be rain that would finish
Mabel? She drove out in it the day of the
big storm when nearly a foot of rain fell

in only a few hours. There was a stretch of road
covered with water. She'd driven it many times—
couldn't be deep. So she drove right in. They
found her body out of the car two days later.

Blame it on her ignorance of the power
of flowing water, or foolishness, her failure
to heed warnings that were clear, or arrogance
in the face of nature. Or blame it on the rain.

LISA ST. JOHN

Particle Song

The particle song is a lullaby to permanence.
These mountains: soft, green, curved,
are not our Sonoran mesas—dusted red angles, a haven
for creation.

But I am learning contemplation as the summer is tucked in.
I was never good at bedtime story-songs, so as I try and write a poem
about these eastern volcanic remnants, I hear instead the promise of waves
to the sand.

The promise of death to us all.

Only particles connect our dots.
How massive and microscopic, these tectonics that bind us.

I was trying to write a poem about these mountains
but I heard you,
and cannot help but sing this love song to permanence instead.

ERIC RAMPSON

Hazards

It's one of those places where the land seems buckled up, hills that all slope down to the same spot, marked by the intersection of two barely-paved roads. There's a light but it's a strange one, not like one you've ever seen, a wooden telephone pole with a small metal arm sticking off near the top, one uncovered bulb, shocking white, so bright that the intersection seems like a displaced chunk of daytime boxed in on all sides by jet black, starless night.

The hiss of wind through the leaves of the trees, the whirring cicada calls, and the electric hum of that strange light aren't enough to drown out the rhythmic click-click of the hazard lights as you get out of your car and approach the man in the overalls and hoodie hunched by the front driver's side wheel. His car is tilted up on a jack. His breath comes in thick white clouds. He is fumbling with a tire iron, his bare hands bright red with the cold. When the iron clatters on the blacktop, he rubs his hands together then cups them around his mouth and blows on them for warmth.

You pull on your sleek, expensive gloves with the bioelectric fingertips for using your smartphone outside in the winter. You aren't helpless though. You know how to change a tire, so as he rises to greet you, you offer your help. As you bend down to pick up the tire iron, he asks why you were out this way, you tell him your reason, and he laughs. When you ask him the same thing, he tells you he comes out here all the time. You look around and think, yeah, this place could be nice to just sit and think, so you say as much.

He says, no, it's not like that.

He comes out here, he says, and jacks his car up on the jack and waits. When it's warm out, he says, he only comes out in the rain, pretends his arm is hurt, wears a sling and drops the iron over and over, waiting for a car to come by. You'd be surprised, he says, how many people just drive by him in the rain when he looks like a cripple, just sail on by and leave him there. Sure, he says, he isn't really stuck, but what awful people, right? But not you, he says. A regular boy scout.

By now, you've tightened your grip on the tire iron but he says, hey, hey, it's not like that either. He's not going to hurt you. He doesn't want to. He wants to meet nice people, good people, he says, and that phrase doesn't calm you.

He needs, he says, a good person. Because he is.

He was a pediatric oncologist when he first came out here. He got a call, he says, through a friend of a friend of a colleague of an acquaintance, he's forgotten the chain now, but he got a call, he says, that a child was sick, that the parents were uneducated and poor, could he come out and see her, give an opinion so that the parents would maybe pursue treatment, that kind of thing. He'd never done anything like that before, he says, but he didn't hesitate, said he'd be there that night and when he got here, well, he says, gesturing around you, there aren't any houses, not even a cabin or shack. This person who called him was here, just leaning on his car, a beaten up Honda. He was a cop. A good cop. A good person. Never took a bribe or coerced a confession or fixed a speeding ticket. He put some real bad people away for a long time.

The cop had called him out here, he says, because he was the first truly good person the cop had come across after his own trip out here. The cop had been brought out by a journalist he knew, a woman who had lots of awards, done amazing work uncovering all sorts of bad stuff, a name you'd recognize if he said it, he says. The journalist had called the cop and the cop had called him, he says.

And now, he says, you're here.

He couldn't do it, he says, call someone, even someone he barely knew. So he decided to wait, he says, and find a stranger good enough to stop on a dark road in bad conditions. Because that's what he needs, he says. When he came out here the first time, he says, the cop knocked him down and handcuffed him until He arrived. When He showed up, he says, the cop set me in front of Him, on my knees, and He told me that I was his now. And as the hum of the light grows painful and the hiss of the leaves becomes the sound of a swishing tail in long grass and the clicking hazards turn sharper, like the sound of hooves on stone, the guy in the overalls says he's sorry, and he starts to cry and he says he gets it now, that he's lost, that He can't take you unless you do something terrible, like stop a good person on the road.

MAX STEPHAN

Truffles (Tuber Magnatum)

Pungent, ripe,
your chemistry brings rapture,
a need to unearth elation;

the aroma –
not fragrant, not perfumed,
but provocative,

worming its way through
grains of silt, of sand,
unconcerned about scandals on Fifth Avenue,
bills changing hands under moonlight –

what matters
is innocence,
the magic that makes
nostrils flare,
pheromones run frantic
with raw, irrational passion.

But there is no hurry.

Deep in the forest,
undetected, concealed,
you relax – soaking up
pure bliss,
carefully sliding your tendrils
through darkness,
wrapping the roots of life
with delicate threads of silk

like a shroud.

JOHN STUPP

Joe Louis Runs the Voodoo Down

Town
by town
the people came
and asked
could he
raise a man from the dead
could he
heal the sick
he
who could tear an auditorium in two with his fists
he
whose strength was twice the strength
of an ordinary man
he
who nearly won World War II
by himself
before it started thank you
when he found the jaw
of the National Socialist Max Schmeling in 1938 at Yankee Stadium
there's a lot of things wrong with America
but Hitler won't fix it
he said
who loved his mother
and Detroit and golf and sunsets and Jesus
and
on the advice of his handlers
never had his picture taken with a white woman

JO BARBARA TAYLOR

Sunday at Kokomo Federal Correctional Facility

Saint Max's stained-glass halo shimmers in the morning sun,
pours a rainbow through the Sunday sanctuary at the prison of souls.

The clock ticks time. A barred organist pipes a Bach prelude,
pedals a quartet of winds. Harmonies sway from the beams

like a lost lover's hair, lick the floor, and slip away
through the congregation, captive hymns.

The bassoon snoozes. A glib clarinet gossips
with the whining oboe. The piccolo rhymes ko-ko-mo ko-ko-mo.

Notes are free to come and go.

Sinners bathe in broken light, and Sunday's message
is lost to the key of free. A refracted melody sings the story of sorrows.

Each inmate listens to his own sad memories of sunrise, croons
the heavy hand of heaven laid upon him. Each plays his own record.

In this spectrum-fingered dawn, each is a child of morning,
orchestrating evening as the piccolo ticks ko-ko-mo ko-ko-mo.

Notes are free to come and go.

ALLEN TULLOS

Odd, Numbered Days

Even numbered days reveal
the camouflaged whippoorwill
chanting dawn's window,
you red-stepping sauna steam.

Odd, numbered days unroll
the unbearable lightness of biscuits,
bees on lavender scaffolds,
nights that didn't shake the world,
though we stooped to new highs.

Brightened regions of the brain
signal acute over-the-topism.
Light-bearing beams contrive
torn scrolls of clouds and maple flame
to fire a still-green oak.

Short shuffle steps the sighted take
sounding the black atop 3 AM stairs.
Hand-waving widening circles
for balance and the switch.

As leaves turn against us,
corrugated beech and Halloween ginkgo
concede the inconsolable grayscale.
Let's leave it at that
and the hands my hands remember.

BILL VAN EVERY

On Finding Animals in the Clouds

The dog that was biting
the gravedigger's leg
just seconds ago
has now become
a car driving from the mouth
of a beautiful movie star.
The heart shaped air compressor
becomes an old woman churning butter.
There is a madman
taking a bite out of the sun;
and to the west,
in the corner of the sky,
a hog rooting acorns
from behind the moon's ear

SARAH WEEKS

Company

Forehead numb against the windowpane,
hands pinching the old gluey paint on the sash,
I look to the yellow cast from the lamp across the street—
the only way to gauge the pace of the nighttime Nor'easter.

Drubbing down like a working hound's tongue,
flakes form hedges on tree branches—
at once fortifying and laying bare the vulnerability of the season.

The air smells like a static charge, saying:
"Retreat! with your little, dry-skinned feet
to your gently pilling, warm flannel sheets!"

And clangs of heat roll from copper pipes, and
gusting winds bid me back to my snug bottom-bunk,
but I stay and I wait for the grey boom of the plow.

I can see it as I hear it still a mile away...
a channel gliding open, sidewalks vanishing, a wake of gritty slush
whose bitter cold is like a shell of sea spray around and old salt's pipe.

I covet the clatter of the plow,
even as it rattles foundations and rasps the asphalt:
someone is still out there working.
I don't feel so alone in the dark.

JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS

No More Ocean

Waves of fathers socket wrench-deep into
household repairs. Sons, & me somewhere

among them, clinging like tourniquets to the *click-*
click & grunts, every loosening bolt.

Now that the screen doors are in place, hinges
slamming noiselessly, we watch the fire

retire from their eyes. Tide pools of wheat
once the wind's died down. Crumbled,

whiskey-warm, over dinner tables, sails empty, dragging
forks through whitecaps of mashed things.

Minced stars in our hands, searching for new skies
to glue them to. To navigate by. No more captains

than the rusty leaves skimming the calm surface
of a birdbath we once thought an ocean.

CONTRIBUTORS

ESTEFANIA ACQUAVIVA is a senior at Villanova University pursuing a bachelor's degree in English and Spanish literature, with minors in creative writing and business. She grew up in her family's printing press, El Comercio, in Quito, Ecuador. The passion she has developed for the written word was born at El Comercio, but she now pursues writing because of her love for it.

HEATHER BELL ADAMS' novel, *Marantha Road*, was published in 2017 by Vandalia Press. Her short fiction appears in *The Thomas Wolfe Review*, *Broad River Review*, *Clapboard House*, *Deep South Magazine*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *Gravel*, and elsewhere.

CHRISTOPHER ALLEN is the author of the flash fiction collection *Other Household Toxins*. His short fiction has appeared in *[PANK]*, *Juked*, *Indiana Review*, *FRiGG*, *The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts* and others. Allen was both a finalist (as translator) and semifinalist for *The Best Small Fictions 2017*. A native Tennessean, he now lives somewhere in Europe and is the managing editor at *SmokeLong Quarterly*.

CATHY ALLMAN entered the writing field as a reporter after attending the school of Cinema and Television at the University of Southern California. She never stopped writing poetry while working in advertising and marketing, and eventually earned an MFA from Manhattanville College. She teaches creativity workshops at high schools and at her Connecticut office. Previous work has appeared in *Blue Earth Review*, *The Critical Pass Review*, *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Peregrine*, *Pisgah Review*, *Sanskrit*, and elsewhere.

ELEANOR ALTMAN is a writer from Chestertown, Maryland.

ASHLYN AREND is 24 years old and a Bay Area native. When she's not scribbling in one of her many notebooks or tapping away on her 1920's typewriter, she's either knitting or studying foreign languages. You can read more of her work in issue #19 of *Zaum* magazine.

GARY BECK has spent most of his adult life as a theater director, and as an art dealer when he couldn't make a living in theater. He has 11 published chapbooks and two more accepted for publication, as well as numerous novels and short story collections. His original plays and translations of Moliere, Aristophanes and Sophocles have been produced Off Broadway. His poetry, fiction and essays have appeared in hundreds of literary magazines. He currently lives in New York City. For more information about his work, visit garybeck.com.

LESLEE BECKER, the winner of the 2017 Rash Award in Fiction, is from Fort Collins, Colorado. Her stories have appeared in *Epoch*, *Iowa Review*, *Kenyon Review*, and elsewhere.

TRUDI BENFORD is the Director of Creative Services at GMMB, a strategic communications firm in Washington, DC. Writing poetry is one way Trudi keeps her creative life vibrant outside of work. In 2017, two of her pieces were short-listed for Canada's *Magpie* Award for Poetry and she completed her first full-length collection, *I Want to Know*.

J.A. BERNSTEIN'S forthcoming novel, *Rachel's Tomb* (New Issues Press), won the 2017 AWP Award Series Novel Prize, and his forthcoming story collection, *Stick-Light* (Eyewear Editions), was a finalist for the Robert C. Jones and Beverly Prizes. His work has appeared in *Boston Review*, *Kenyon Review Online*, *Tampa Review*, *Tin House (web)*, *Shenandoah*, and other journals, and won the John Gyunon Prize, Knut House Novel Contest, and Hackney Novel Award. A graduate of U.S.C.'s Ph.D. Program in Creative Writing and Literature, he is an assistant professor of English at the University of Minnesota Duluth and the fiction editor of *Tikkun*.

TIM BLEECKER is a writer from Manheim, Pennsylvania.

CREIGHTON BLINN'S writing has been published on three continents. His poetry has appeared in *The Binnacle*, *Down in the Dirt*, *Goldfish Press*, *Census*, *Door Is a Jar*, *From the Depths* and (forthcoming) *The Helix Magazine*. In addition, his prose story "The Fifth Day" has been serialized in the journal *Zenite*. He lives in Brooklyn, New York, and performs his work regularly around the city. Among his featured performances are *Son of a Pony* (at Cornelia Street Café) and Poetic Theater Productions Presents (at The Wild Project). He was invited to contribute an original piece to the *What the Hell Is Love?* project. He is a founding member of the Brooklyn Heights Writers' Workshop. His blog may be viewed at <http://pacingmusings.tumblr.com>; he may be tweeted @creightonblinn.

ACE BOGCESS is author of three books of poetry, most recently *Ultra Deep Field* (Brick Road Poetry Press, 2017), and the novel *A Song Without a Melody* (Hyperborea Publishing, 2016). His writing has appeared in *Harvard Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *RATTLE*, *River Styx*, *North Dakota Quarterly* and many other journals. He lives in Charleston, West Virginia.

NANCY BROCK is the 2014 South Carolina Academy of Authors Fiction Fellowship winner. Her short stories have appeared in the literary anthologies *Fall Lines 1*, *Fall Lines 2*, and *Broad River Review*. She is a contributor to *State of the Heart*, Vol. 2 (USC Press). She placed third in the 2017 Clay Reynolds Novella Competition (Texas Review Press). She is an eight-time finalist or short-listed finalist in the *Pirate's Alley* Faulkner-Wisdom Literary Competition.

SUMMER BYERS received a *Broad River Review* Editor's Prize in Poetry for undergraduate work at Gardner-Webb University. From Forest City, North Carolina, Byers is an English major and a May 2018 graduate of Gardner-Webb University.

PAMELA S. CARTER studied with Joelle Fraser, and her work has appeared in *Midway* and *Pamplermousse*. She graduated with honors from the University of Denver's Sturm College of Law and practiced law briefly after graduation. Pamela now considers herself a full-time writer.

JONA COLSON'S poems have been published in *The Southern Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Subtropics*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Massachusetts Review*, and elsewhere.

SCOTT DOCKERY was a young man once in Asheville, North Carolina, and is now an old man in Knoxville, Tennessee. He has been writing novels and scribbling poems for half a century but leaves them unseen on high shelves in the back of dark closets. He adores Thomas Wolfe and was sitting on the front porch of the Wolfe House in Asheville one day when he thought to himself, "Wolfe never left his tattered manuscripts to rot in closets."

HOLLIE DUGAS lives and teaches in New Mexico. When she is not writing poetry, she critiques novels and poetry in small writing workshops. Dugas has a knack for making language delicate. Her work was most recently selected to be included in *Barrow Street*, *Fugue*, *Phoebe*, *Adrienne*, *Under the Gum Tree*, *Folio*, *Slipstream*, *Jelly Bucket*, *Tulane Review*, *Peregrine*, and *CALYX*. Her poem "As You Are Drying the Red Chili Peppers" was a finalist for the Peseroff Prize at *Breakwater Review*. She is currently a member on the editorial board for *Off the Coast*.

DAVIS ENLOE is retired from the South Carolina Army National Guard. After retiring, he graduated from Converse College's MFA program (Poetry). His poetry has been published in *Barrow Street*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *New Delta Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Plainsongs*, and others. His first short story "A Curious Man," was recently accepted for publication by the *Chariton Review*. He lives in Greenville, SC.

D FERRARA'S work has appeared in *Green Prints*, *Stirring*, and *Crack the Spine*. A screenplay, "Arvin Lindemeyer Takes Canarsie," won the Oil Valley Film Festival Outstanding Feature Screenplay; and a play, "Favor," won the New Jersey ACT Award for Outstanding Production of an Original Play. Three additional screenplays have been optioned, and

several other short plays produced. Ferrara earned an M.A. in creative writing from Wilkes University, J.D. from New York Law School, an LL.M. from New York University, and a B.A. in theatre from Roger Williams.

GARY GALS WORTH grew up in the New York City area. He spent three years in the Marine Corps before studying painting and filmmaking at the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Chicago. In addition to writing poetry, he is a professional plumber and a lifelong student of Zen Meditation. He's published two books of poems: *Yes Yes* and *Beyond the Wire*. Gary lives in Hoboken, New Jersey.

KATHLEEN GLASSBURN earned an MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University, Los Angeles. Currently, she resides in Edmonds, Washington with her husband, three dogs, two cats, and a 50-year-old turtle. When not writing or reading, she likes to play the piano and horseback ride. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Cairn*, *Crucible*, *riverSedge*, *SLAB*, and elsewhere. Her story "Picnics" was a finalist in *Glimmer Train's* Best Start contest. Glassburn is Managing Editor of *The Writer's Workshop Review* (www.thewritersworkshopreview.net). Her novel, *Making It Work*, is now available from Amazon.

ERIC GREINKE'S most recent book is *The Third Voice-Notes on the Art of Poetic Collaboration* (Presa Press, 2017). His work has been published in *The Aureorean*, *California Quarterly*, *The Delaware Poetry Review*, *Forge*, *Gargoyle*, *Ginyu* (Japan), *The Green Door* (Belgium), *The Hurricane Review*, *The Journal* (UK), *Main Street Rag*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, *Pinyon*, *Poem*, *Prosopisia* (India), *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *The South Carolina Review*, *The University Of Tampa Review*, and many others. His book *For The Living Dead-New & Selected Poems* (Presa Press, 2014; Simon Pulse, 2014) was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. He is one of twenty American poets included in the international anthology *The Second Genesis: An Anthology of Contemporary World Poetry* (Anuraag Sharma, Ed., 2014).

JUDITH GRISSMER has been published in *The Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *The Alembic*, *Clare*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Streetlight Magazine*, and in other literary magazines. She has attended poetry workshops and classes at universities and writing centers, worked independently with instructors at those centers, and have participated in writers critique groups for over thirty years. She lives with her husband in Charlottesville, Virginia, and spends time on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, where she enjoys beach walks, working with wildlife, and managing our vacation rental home.

MEGAN NEMISE HALL teaches English at Dobyns-Bennett High School in Kingsport, Tennessee. She holds an MFA from The University of Tampa and is a poetry editor for Driftwood Press. She has additional work forthcoming in *Cider Press Review*.

CAROL HAMILTON has recent publications in *Paper Street*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Common Ground*, *Calliope*, *Louisiana Review*, *Birmingham Literary Arts*, *Sandy River Review*, *Turtle Island Quarterly*, *Tipton Poetry* and others. She has published 17 books. She is a former Poet Laureate of Oklahoma and has been nominated seven times for a Pushcart Prize.

PATRICIA L. HAMILTON is a Professor of English at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee. Recently her work has appeared in *Not Very Quiet* (Australia), *Bindweed* (UK), *Red River Review*, *Illya's Honey*, *The Windhover*, *Whale Road Review*, and *Poetry South*. *The Distance to Nightfall*, her first collection, was published in 2014 by Main Street Rag. She won the 2015 Rash Award in Poetry and has received three Pushcart nominations.

ALANI HICKS-BARTLETT is a writer and translator who lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. She holds a Ph.D in Literature and Gender Studies from the University of California, Berkeley. She has won awards for her creative work, such as the Emily Chamberlain Cook Prize and The Dorothy Rosenberg Memorial Prize in Lyric Poetry, and her work has appeared or is forthcoming in journals such as *Fourth River*, *Tweetlit*, *Continuum*, and *Mantis: A Journal of Poetry, Criticism, and Translation*.

Born Anniston, Alabama, **ROBERT W. HILL** now resides in Huntington, West Virginia. Hill has taught at many college and universities, with the most recent being Marshall University. He has published poems in *Appalachian Journal*, *Ascent*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Davidson Miscellany*, *EMRYS Journal*, *Grand Central Review*, *McNeese Review*, *North Carolina Literary Review*, *Old Red Kimono*, *Phi Kappa Phi Forum*, *Shenandoah*, *South Carolina Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Southern Review*, and elsewhere.

AARON HILTON received a *Broad River Review* Editor's Prize in Poetry for undergraduate poetry at Gardner-Webb University. From Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Hilton is an English major and a May 2018 graduate of Gardner-Webb University.

LOWELL JAEGER (Montana Poet Laureate 2017-2019) is founding editor of Many Voices Press, author of seven collections of poems, recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Montana Arts Council, and winner of the Grolier Poetry Peace Prize. Most recently Jaeger was awarded the Montana Governor's Humanities Award for his work in promoting thoughtful civic discourse.

ROLLIN JEWETT is an award winning playwright, screenwriter, singer/songwriter, poet and author. His songs have won the International Music Software Trade Association (IMSTA FESTA) Award both in 2015 and 2016. Mr. Jewett's feature film credits include "Laws of Deception" and "American Vampire". Mr. Jewett's poems and stories have been seen in several literary magazines and a short story "The Girl in the Forest" was recently published in *Ghost Stories: An Anthology* by Zimbell House Publishing. His plays have won several awards and have been produced all over the world. They are published by Lazy Bee Scripts. An avid photographer, Mr. Jewett's photo art has also been published in several magazines online and in print.

THERIN JOHNS lives in Seattle where she works as a writer. Her poetry has appeared in *Calyx Journal*, *Eclipse*, *inter/rupture*, and *5X5*. She holds an MFA from Eastern Washington University.

SHARON KENNEDY-NOLLE, a graduate of Vassar College, holds an MFA and doctoral degree from the University of Iowa. In addition to attending the Sarah Lawrence Summer Writing Institute for several years, she was accepted to the Bread Loaf Conferences in both Middlebury and Sicily in 2016. She has also been honored to be a scholarship participant at the Frost Place Summer Writing Program. Her interests in history and traveling have informed both her scholarly and creative work.

OLAF KRONEMAN graduated from the Michigan State University College of Human Medicine with an MD. After interning at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, Kroneman attended the University of Virginia to complete a residency in internal medicine. Kroneman participated in a fellowship in nephrology at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School. He entered private practice in 1983. His interaction with patients and other healthcare professionals prompted him to write. His story, "Fight Night," won the Winning Writers Sports Fiction and Essay Contest, and "The Recidivist," won the *Writer's Digest* short story contest.

STEVE LAMBERT'S work has recently appeared in *Into Emrys Journal*, *The Gambler*, and *Deep South Magazine*. His story, "Love in Sahwoklee," will be in the Spring 2018 issue of *Emrys Journal*. Another story, "Fishing with Max Hardy" won third-place in *Glimmer Train's* 2015 Very Short Fiction Award. He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net award. Lambert's first poetry collection, *Heat Seekers* (Cherry Grove Collections), will be released in October. He has an MFA from UTEP. He lives in the uncool, unhistorical part of St. Augustine with his wife and daughter, works in a public library, and teaches part-time at the University of North Florida.

LEE LANDAU writes with raw honesty about her personal landscape, interaction with family events, those dysfunctional backstories. Her work has been published extensively

and received many awards. Recent work has appeared or been honored by *New Millennium Writings*, *Literary Orphans*, *Crosswinds Poetry Journal*, *Modern Poetry Quarterly Review*, *Bluestockings Magazine*, *Wisconsin Review*, *Crosswinds Poetry Journal*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *Broad River Review*, *Broad Street Magazine*, and elsewhere.

After earning graduate degrees from the University of North Carolina, **RICHARD LEBOVITZ** taught college and high school English before entering the fields of journalism and professional conference planning. His poetry springs from his desire to seize on those fleeting moments of beauty the natural world delivers to our doorsteps and to share those experiences on an emotional level with his fellow human beings.

JOHN LINSTROM is a doctoral candidate in English and American Literature at New York University. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *This Week in Poetry*, *Prairie Gold: An Anthology of the American Heartland*, and *The Reed*. In 2015, Counterpoint Press published his centennial edition of Liberty Hyde Bailey's ecological manifesto, *The Holy Earth*, with a new foreword by Wendell Berry. He also holds an MFA in Creative Writing and Environment from Iowa State University.

IRIS LITT has taught Woodstock Writers Workshops for twenty years, and has held writing workshops for the New York Public Library, Educational Alliance, and others. She has taught creative writing as an adjunct at Bard College and SUNY-Ulster. She attended Ohio State University and Universidad de las Americas, Mexico City, and obtained my bachelor's degree. Litt currently lives in Woodstock, New York, and New York's Greenwich Village, and winters on Anna Maria Island, Florida, which was the inspiration for her book *Snowbird*. She won an Honorable Mention in Winning Writers' 2016 short story contest.

GREGORY LOBAS is an outdoor writer and poet living in the western foothills of North Carolina. He is a retired firefighter/paramedic, and is a partner in a blueberry farm, one of his part-time jobs that cost him money.

SEAN MADDEN is an analyst at the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Kentucky and a B.A. in English from the University of California at Berkeley. Recently, he was awarded the Emerging Writers Prize by *The John Updike Review* for an essay on the titular author's short fiction. Other essays and stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Dappled Things*, *Umbrella Factory Magazine*, *Alternating Current's The Coil*, and a creative writing textbook by Great River Learning. He lives in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada with his wife and son, and is currently seeking representation for my first novel.

SARAH MCCANN has been a Writing Fellow at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop and has worked around the world. She has been published and has work forthcoming in such journals as *The Bennington Review*, *Margie*, *The Broken Bridge Review*, *Midway Journal*, *The South Dakota Review* and *Hanging Loose*. Her poetry has also appeared in Thom Tammara's anthology, *Visiting Frost: Poems Inspired by the Life and Work of Robert Frost* and an anthology from the Academy of American Poets, *New Voices*. Her translations from the Modern Greek into English have been recognized by the Fulbright Foundation with a grant and published in such anthologies and journals as *Austerity Measures*, *Words Without Borders*, *Poetry International*, and *World Literature Today*. She has also had the pleasure to edit a collection of poetry from the late American poet Robert Lax, *Tertium Quid*, and a book of her translations of the Greek poet Maria Laina is forthcoming from World Poetry Books through the University of Connecticut.

KEVIN J. MCDANIEL lives in Pulaski, Virginia, with his wife, two daughters, and two old chocolate Labs. To date, his work has appeared, or forthcoming, in *Appalachian Heritage Writers Symposium*, *Artemis Journal*, *Broad River Review*, *Clinch Mountain Review*, *Common Ground Review*, *Floyd County Moonshine*, *Freshwater Literary Journal*, *GFT Press*, *Gravel*, *JuxtaProse*, *The Cape Rock*, *The Main Street Rag*, and others. His recent chapbook, *Family Talks*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2017.

ALEX MCINTOSH lives and writes in Kentucky, her favorite place in the world. She received her B.A. in Recreation with an Emphasis in Adventure Leadership from Asbury University, and is currently working on her M.A. in English with a concentration in Creative Writing from Northern Kentucky University, and her MFA in Poetry from Miami University. The woods are her favorite place to walk, think, sing, and sleep. You can find photos of her poodle named Grizzly Bear on Instagram @the_real_alexmac

SARAH MERROW grew up in New England and now lives in Baltimore. Her chapbook *Unpacking the China* won the QuillsEdge Press 2016 chapbook competition. She has twice been a finalist for the Rash Award for Poetry, and received an honorable mention in the 2016 Passager poetry contest. Her poems have appeared in a number of journals, including *Passager*, *Broad River Review*, *A Quiet Courage*, *The Courtship of Winds*, and *WORDPEACE*, and she has published essays in *The Flutist Quarterly*, a trade magazine. In addition to writing poetry, she restores and repairs concert flutes for professional flutists.

CATHERINE MOORE is the author of three chapbooks and the forthcoming *Ulla! Ulla!* (Main Street Rag Publishing). Her work appears in *Tahoma Literary Review*, *Caesura*, *Tishman Review*, *Southampton Review*, *Still: the Journal*, *Mid-American Review* and in various anthologies. She's been awarded a Walker Percy and a Hambidge fellowship, her honors also include the Southeast Review's Gearhart Poetry Prize, a Nashville MetroArts grant, inclusion in the juried "Best Small Fictions of 2015," as well as Pushcart and Best of the Net nominations. Catherine holds a MFA in creative writing and teaches at a community college. She's tweetable @CatPoetic.

MALLORY MOORE is co-winner of the 2018 J. Calvin Koonts Poetry Award for senior English majors and minors at Gardner-Webb University. From Maurertown, Virginia, Moore is a May 2018 graduate of Gardner-Webb University.

CAMERON MORSE taught and studied in China. Diagnosed with a brain tumor in 2014, he is currently a third-year MFA candidate at UMKC and lives with his wife, Lili, and newborn son, Theodore Ian, in Blue Springs, Missouri. His poems have been or will be published in over 50 different magazines, including *New Letters*, *Bridge Eight*, *South Dakota Review*, *Fourth & Sycamore* and *TYPO*. His first collection, *Fall Risk*, is coming out in January from Glass Lyre Press.

RAY MORRISON'S debut collection of short stories, *In a World of Small Truths*, was published in November of 2012. His short stories have appeared in *Ecotone*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *StorySouth*, *FictionSoutheast*, *Carve Magazine*, and others.

STEPHANY L. NEWBERRY-DAVIS is from Eastern North Carolina and now lives outside of Asheville, North Carolina with her husband and their six children. A graduate of Western Carolina University, she works full-time as an online English professor. She is a member of the Great Smokies Writing Program and the North Carolina Writers' Network. "The Seahorse," a 2016 Doris Betts Fiction Prize Finalist and Honorable Mention Winner for The Writers' Workshop of Asheville 2017 Literary Fiction Contest, was her first publication and finalist for the 2016 Rash Award in Fiction.

JEANNE OBBARD received her bachelor's degree in feminist and gender studies from Bryn Mawr College, and works in clinical trial management. She was granted a Leeway Seedling Award for Emerging Artists in 2001. Her writing has appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Barrow Street*, *Cider Press Review*, and *The Rumpus*. She can be found on the web at jeanneobbard.com.

LUBA OSTASHEVSKY is the managing editor of *This View of Life*, a magazine about human evolution, and a teaching assistant in the chemistry department at Hunter College. She has written for *Aeon*, *Popular Science*, *Nautilus*, among others.

ROSEMARY PEEK is a North Carolina writer and artist living in the beautiful Appalachian

mountains. She writes about her life and the world around her and reads pretty much anything she can get her hands on. She is also a photographer and a Lutheran Pastor.

GEORGE PERREAULT is from Reno, Nevada, and his most recent collection, *Bodark County*, features poems in the voices of characters living on the Llano Estacado. He has received awards from the Nevada Arts Council and the Washington Poets Association, and has served as a visiting writer in New Mexico, Montana, and Utah. His poems have been nominated both for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net, as well as selected for fifteen anthologies and dozens of magazines.

BARRY PETERS is a writer and teacher in Durham, North Carolina. He has published fiction and poetry in *Witness*, *Rattle*, *Sudden Fiction*, *Sport Literate*, and elsewhere.

DIANA PINCKNEY is the winner of the 2010 *Ekphrasis* Prize and *Atlanta Review's* 2012 International Poetry Prize. She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize five times. *Cream City Review*, *Crucible* and *Persimmon Tree* are among the journals that have given her awards. Published in *RHINO*, *Cave Wall*, *Arroyo*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, *Nine Mile Magazine*, *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, & other journals and anthologies, Pinckney has five books of poetry, including 2015's *The Beast and The Innocent*.

PHILL PROVANCE'S poetry and prose have appeared in *The Baltimore Sun*, *the Crab Creek Review*, *decomp*, *Word Riot* and others. Previously, he wrote for *Wizard* and *InQuest Gamer* before scripting MediaTier Ltd.'s comic strip *The Adventures of Ace Hoyle*. In 2011, Cy Gist Press published his first poetry chapbook, *The Day the Sun Rolled Out of the Sky*. His second chapbook, *Given to Suddenly Laughter*, is forthcoming in 2019 (Cy Gist), as is his first full-length work of non-fiction (The History Press). His critical essay "Warring with Whitmania" will appear in *The Poetic Legacy of Whitman, Williams, and Ginsberg* (PCCC). Among other honors and awards, his "The Stenographers Union" was also recently named one of two finalists for the 2017 *Crab Creek Review* Poetry Prize by Diane Seuss. Phill is completing his MFA in Poetry and Fiction at West Virginia Wesleyan College. When not writing and reading, he prefers spending time with the best little guy in the whole world, his son, Ledger.

ERIC RAMPSON is a Chicago-based writer who spent almost 20 years studying, performing, and teaching improv comedy before getting an MFA in Fiction from The MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College. His comic book work is published by *Lonely Robot Comics* and *Markosia*. Fiction has been published in *The Logan Square Literary Review*, *Trembles*, *Change Seven Magazine*, *Typishly*, and *The Matador Review*.

RON RASH is the author of the 2009 PEN/Faulkner finalist and New York Times bestseller *Serena* and *Above the Waterfall*, in addition to four prizewinning novels, including *The Cove*, *One Foot in Eden*, *Saints at the River*, and *The World Made Straight*; four collections of poems; and six collections of stories, among them *Burning Bright*, which won the 2010 Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, and *Chemistry and Other Stories*, which was a finalist for the 2007 PEN/Faulkner Award. Twice the recipient of the O. Henry Prize, he teaches at Western Carolina University.

HANNAH RAY is co-winner of the 2018 J. Calvin Koonts Poetry Award for senior English majors and minors at Gardner-Webb University. From High Point, North Carolina, Ray is a May 2018 graduate of Gardner-Webb University.

APARNA SANYAL is a writer, theatre producer, and award-winning furniture designer. Holding an M.A. from Kings College, London, she is a semi-finalist in the ongoing Fourth Annual Songs of Eretz Poetry Award, 2017-2018. A popular spoken word poet, she performs at events across venues in India. Her printed poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Autumn Sky Poetry Daily*, *Poetry Breakfast*, *Songs of Eretz Poetry Review*, *The Visitant*, *The Same*, *Leaves of Ink*, *Califragile*, *Duane's Poetree*, and elsewhere. She lives with her three-year-old son and husband in Pune, India.

JOYCE SCHMID'S poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Missouri Review*, *Poetry Daily*, *New Ohio Review*, *Sugar House Review*, and other journals and anthologies. She lives in Palo Alto, California, with her husband of over half a century.

LAURA SCHULKIND received her J.D. from New York University, where she focused on public service law, and has since been practicing for thirty years. She is a past president of a statewide professional organization, the California Council of School Attorneys, and is a sought-after speaker throughout the state on issues of diversity and equity in education. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Bluestem*, *Caveat Lector*, *Crack the Spine*, *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, *The Dos Passos Review*, *Eclipse*, *Evening Street Press*, *Forge*, *Good Men Project*, *Legal Studies Forum*, *Light Journal*, *The MacGuffin*, *Minetta Review*, *OxMag*, *The Penmen Review*, *Pennsylvania English*, *Poetry Expressed*, *Reed Magazine*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *Talking River*, *Tiger's Eye*, and *Willow Springs*. Her chapbook, *Lost in Tall Grass*, (Finishing Line Press) was released in May 2014.

CLAIRE SCOTT is an award winning poet who has received multiple Pushcart Prize nominations. Her work has been accepted by the *Atlanta Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Enizagam* and *Healing Muse* among others. Claire is the author of *Waiting to be Called* and the co-author of *Unfolding in Light: A Sisters' Journey in Photography and Poetry*.

MAUREEN SHERBONDY'S most recent book of poems is *Belongings*. She teaches at Alamance Community College in Graham, North Carolina, and lives in Raleigh.

DUNCAN SMITH'S "Certain Inferences from Natural Phenomena" won the *Crucible* Writing Content and was published in the Spring 1982 issue of that journal. He wrote his first poem in over three decades while on vacation in Colorado in 2016. Smith is a librarian living in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where he is the Founder and General Manager of EBSCO's NovelList Division. He is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where he earned a B.A. in English (1978) and a Master of Science in Library Science (1980). "New Ground" was a finalist in the 2017 Rash Award.

KERRI VINSON SNELL works as an assistant professor of English at McPherson College in McPherson, Kansas. Her poems have appeared in *Mikrokosmos*, *Relief Journal*, *Ruminate*, *Oklahoma Review* and *Foothill: a Journal of Poetry*. Prior to her poetry life, she worked for 15 years as a journalist.

LEROY SORENSON graduated from the Loft Literary Center Foreword program and participated in the Loft Mentor Series. Main Street Rag published his debut poetry collection, *Forty Miles North of Nowhere*, in February of 2016. His work has appeared in *Nimrod*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *Naugatuck River Review*, *Cold Mountain Review* and other journals. He was a finalist in the *Naugatuck River Review's* 8th Annual Narrative Poetry Contest. Sorenson lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, with his wife (who is a novelist), where he is working on a second book of poetry.

MATTHEW J. SPIRENG'S book *What Focus Is* was published in 2011 by WordTech Communications. His book *Out of Body* won the 2004 Bluestem Poetry Award and was published in 2006 by Bluestem Press at Emporia State University. Chapbooks include *Clear Cut*, *Young Farmer*, *Encounters*, *Inspiration Point* (winner of the 2000 Bright Hill Press Poetry Chapbook Competition), and *Just This*. Since 1990, his poems have appeared in publications across the United States, including the *Broad River Review*, *North American Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Rattle*, *Louisiana Literature*, *English Journal* and *Poet Lore*. He is an eight-time Pushcart Prize nominee.

LISA ST. JOHN is a high school English Teacher and published poet. Her newest endeavors include a memoir in progress and, of course, poetry. Her first chapbook, *Ponderings*, can be purchased at Finishing Line Press. She lives in the beautiful Hudson Valley of upstate New York where she calls the Catskill Mountains home. Lisa has published her poetry in the *Barbaric Yawp*, *Bear Creek Haiku*, *Misfit Magazine*, *The Poet's Billow* PKA's *Advocate*,

Haight Ashbury Literary Journal, *The Ekphrastic Review*, and *Chronogram Magazine*. The poem “There Must Be a Science to This” won *The Poet’s Billow’s* Bermuda Triangle Contest and “Mowing the Lawn” was shortlisted for the Fish Poetry Prize and later published in *Fish Anthology 2016*. When she is not reading or writing longer pieces, Lisa enjoys thinking out loud on her blog, Random Mind Movements. <http://lisastjohnblog.com>

MAX STEPHAN’S work has appeared in the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Cimarron Review*, the *New Mexico Review*, *Appalachia*, *BlueLine*, *Lyric*, the *Louisiana Review*, the *Potomac Review*, the *Rockhurst Review* and *Slipstream*. Currently he is wooing publishers with his latest collection of poems entitled *Mycology*. Stephan teaches at Niagara University, specializing in Contemporary American Poetry.

JOHN STUPP’S third poetry collection *Pawleys Island* was published in 2017 by Finishing Line Press. His manuscript *Summer Job* won the 2017 Cathy Smith Bowers Poetry Prize and will be published in 2018 by Main Street Rag. He lives near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

JO BARBARA TAYLOR lives in North Carolina. Her poems and fiction have appeared in journals, magazines, anthologies and online, more recently in *Best of the Boston Literary Magazine* and *Broad River Review*. Her most recent book is *How to Come and Go*, published by Chatter House Press, 2016. She is a freelance editor and writing coach, leads poetry workshops through Duke Continuing Education, chairs the workshop committee for the North Carolina Poetry Society, and coordinates a poetry reading series for a Raleigh independent bookstore.

ALLEN TULLOS is co-founder and senior editor of the online journal *Southern Spaces* (southernspaces.org) and author of two books of American Studies: *Habits of Industry* and *Alabama Getaway: The Political Imaginary and the Heart of Dixie*. A professor of history at Emory University, his articles and poems have appeared in numerous publications.

BILL VAN EVERY received his B.A. in creative writing from The University of Arizona. He received his MFA from The Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College. Bill has published in numerous journals over the years. In 2004, Thomas Lux selected Bill’s manuscript, *Devoted Creatures*, as the Judges Choice to be published with Tupelo Press. He is currently finishing a second manuscript, *The Dog Widow’s Howl*.

SARAH WEEKS is a writer and teacher from Blairstown, New Jersey. Her work has appeared previously on *Typishly* and in *Projector Magazine*.

JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS is the editor of two Northwest poetry anthologies and the author of nine collections, including *Disinheritance* and *Controlled Hallucinations*. A seven-time Pushcart nominee, John is the winner of numerous awards, including the Philip Booth Award, *American Literary Review* Poetry Contest, Nancy D. Hargrove Editors’ Prize, *Confrontation* Poetry Prize, and Vallum Award for Poetry. He serves as editor of *The Inflectionist Review* and works as a literary agent. Previous publishing credits include *The Yale Review*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Sycamore Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Saranac Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Third Coast*, and various anthologies. He lives in Portland, Oregon.

